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THE PIONEER BOYS OF THE MISSOURI



OR: IN THE COUNTRY OF THE SIOUX

THE YOUNG PIONEER SERIES

BY HARRISON ADAMS

ILLUSTRATED



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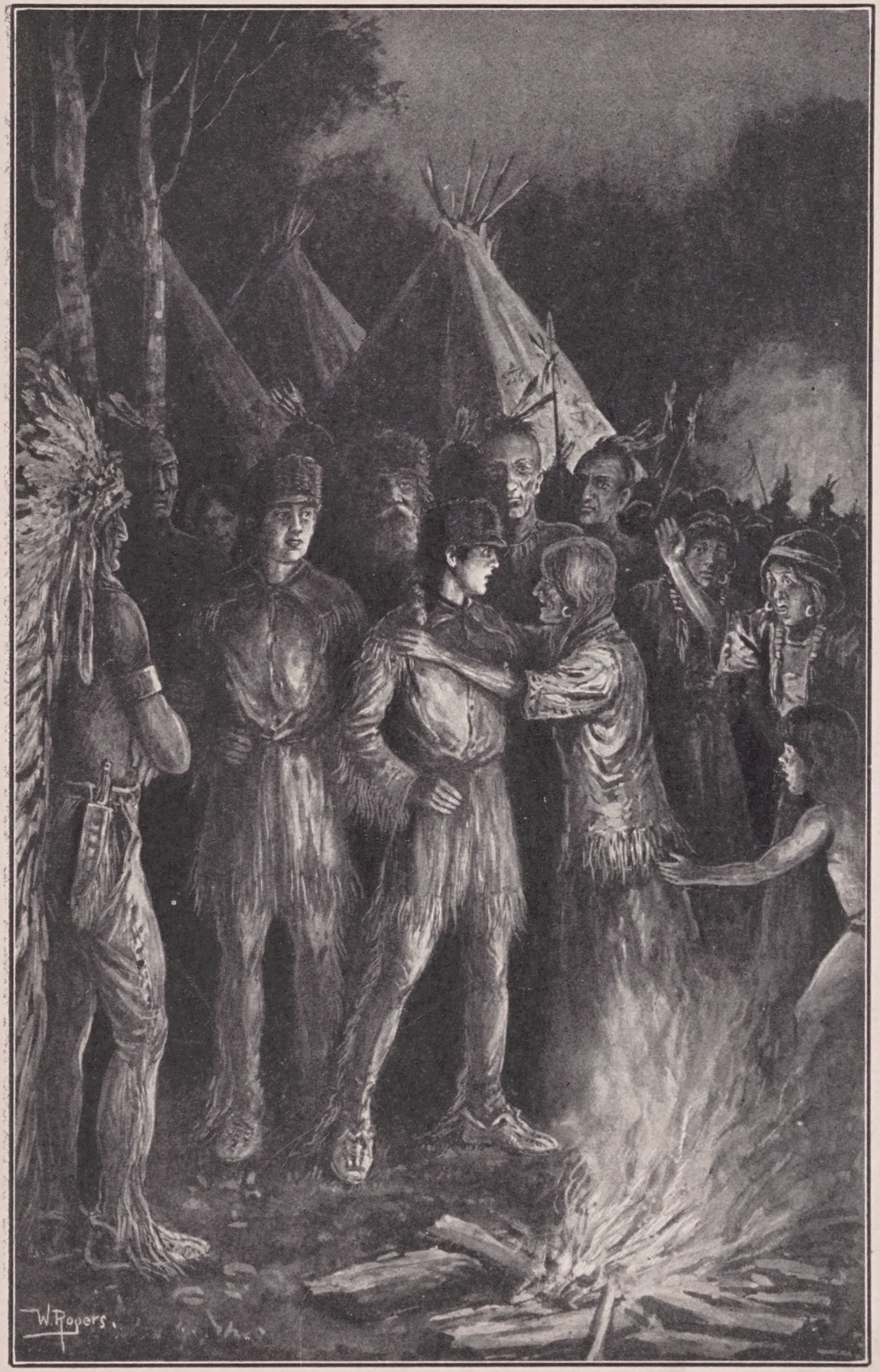
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"A SQUAW DARTED FORWARD, . . . AND, SEIZING HOLD OF ROGER, LOOKED EAGERLY IN HIS FACE."

See page 335.

St. George Rathbonne

The Young Pioneer Series

THE PIONEER BOYS OF THE MISSOURI

OR: IN THE COUNTRY OF THE SIOUX

By HARRISON ADAMS

Author of "The Pioneer Boys of the Ohio," "The Pioneer Boys on the Great Lakes," "The Pioneer Boys of the Mississippi," etc.



Illustrated by
WALTER S. ROGERS

THE PAGE COMPANY
BOSTON ⚜ MDCCCCXIV

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PREFACE

My Dear Boys: — It is with great pleasure that I have responded to my publisher's appeal for a new volume in connection with boy pioneer life during those early days in the history of our country when brave men, and women also, kept pushing the frontier line constantly westward, toward the setting sun.

Since Bob and Sandy Armstrong came to the end of their migrations when they settled on the land purchased by old David, near the junction of the Missouri River with the mighty Mississippi, it is obvious that little that is new could be written concerning those old friends of ours.

But as it happened that they founded families of their own, and each had a son who was said to be a "chip of the old block," the story of young pioneer achievements can best be continued by transferring our allegiance to these two sturdy lads, Dick and Roger, whom, I feel sure, you will like fully as well as you did their fathers.

Just at the time when they had become strapping lads, ready to place full confidence in their

ability to take care of themselves, it chanced that a wonderful opportunity came to them, whereby they were enabled to traverse the course of the great Missouri River from its mouth to its far-away source among the Rocky Mountains.

What this opportunity was like, and what astonishing things they met with on the long and dangerous journey, I have endeavored to describe and set down between the covers of this present book. I trust that you will enjoy reading it fully as well as you did the preceding volumes; and that at some date in the near future we may meet again in the pages of still another story of boy pioneer life.

HARRISON ADAMS.

April 15th, 1914.





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The Pioneer Boys of the Missouri

CHAPTER I

TWO BOYS IN A DUGOUT CANOE

"We are on the worse side of the river, Cousin Roger, if a storm breaks!"

"That is true, Dick; but it may not come down on us for hours yet; and the fish are taking hold finely now."

"Yes, and no one likes to pull them in better than I do; but it seems to me we already have enough in the dugout to supply the whole Armstrong settlement."

"Then mother can send some down to the Cragans in the St. Louis settlement; for they are old, and Mr. Cragan seldom goes out on the Missouri nowadays. Just wait a little longer, Dick. Oh! what a tug that was! Why, they

keep getting bigger all the while. Look, the finest buffalo fish we've taken this afternoon, Dick! Did you ever see such a savage fighter? It makes my arms ache to drag him in against this current."

"Mine have been feeling sore for a long time, now; but, when you get fishing, Roger, you never do know when to stop. Well, I'll give in again, and stay a little longer, though I think we are taking big chances with that storm. But you must put a limit on the fish to be taken. When we have three more, no matter whether they are large or small, we'll wind up our lines and cross the river."

"Make it five, Dick, please; that's only a little thing when the fish are biting as they are now."

"Just as you say, Roger; but not another one, no matter what happens."

"Oh! I always keep my word, even if they do call me Headstrong Roger, just as my father, Sandy Armstrong, was before me. Five it shall be, Dick; and see! that can take only a little while; because I've hooked one before my line was more than half-way out. And see him fight, will you? This is the best fishing we've had this year. It makes me think of the

great times our fathers used to have, away up on the Ohio, where they built their first log cabin, before Grandfather Armstrong emigrated to the new Mississippi country."

For several minutes talkative Roger had to devote all his attention to pulling in the large captive that struggled at the end of his line; and, as his cousin also felt a savage tug about the same time, both were busily engaged.

We may take advantage of their occupation for a brief time to explain just who were the two lads, thus engaged upon the rolling current of the great Missouri River, far back in the summer of the year 1804, when English speaking people were few and far between in this new region, but recently acquired by the United States. (Note 1.) [1]

Years before the grandparents of these lads had left Virginia at the solicitation of the great hunter and backwoodsman, Daniel Boone, who had discovered the richness of the Kentucky country, and was trying to induce settlers to occupy it, despite the savage Indians who resisted their advance.

They had settled on the Ohio, and, with other hardy souls, started to develop homes in the

[1] The notes will be found at the end of the book.

wilderness; and here the two sons of David Armstrong, Bob and Sandy, met with many strange adventures that have been narrated in the first volume of this series.[1]

Later on, a terrible flood, such as the Ohio valley had never before known at that early day, when its banks were lined with primeval forests, had swept the cabins of many of the settlers away, and so discouraged them that a party decided to build a floating house on a raft, and go further down the river, looking for new homesteads in the wilderness, this time in the valley of the mighty Mississippi.

This houseboat had managed to run the gauntlet of all sorts of perils from hostile Shawanees and jealous French trappers, who resented the invasion of what they believed to be their territory by the daring English settlers.

In the end the mighty Mississippi had been reached, and at first the Armstrongs had tried to establish their new home below the junction of the two rivers. It was, however, just before the breaking out of the Revolutionary War, when, over the entire country, settlers were taking sides, either in favor of the colonists or

[1] See "The Pioneer Boys of the Ohio."

the king; and, as fortune would have it, the sentiment in the little community around the Armstrongs seemed to be so saturated with what they called "loyalty" to the far-distant sovereign that by degrees things became utterly unbearable to old David and his stalwart sons.

Conditions had altered so much that in these dark days the French, who had all along been looked upon as enemies, now became warm friends of the colonists. This came about not so much through change of sentiment on the part of the French as a desire to strike back at King George by lending assistance to his rebellious colonies; but, whatever might be the reason, the Armstrongs were content to accept the new order of things, and make the best of them.

Accordingly old David went away prospecting, and later on returned with wonderful accounts of the splendid opening that awaited those who would settle down close to the new and enterprising border trading post, which had been named St. Louis in honor of the French king.

In the end they had once more "pulled up stakes," though it was not so hard to do so this

time, as they had not become greatly attached to the home on the shore of the Mississippi, or their intensely patriotic neighbors, who delighted to annoy them because they favored the cause of Washington and his "rebels," as the Continental army was called at that time.

In their new location near St. Louis the Armstrongs had labored hard to make a permanent home. As the years slipped past, the boys had grown to young manhood; and presently the older brother, Bob, married the daughter of another settler on an adjoining farm, one Nancy Adams.

In due time a second cabin was constructed, to which Bob took his young wife; and just a year later Sandy followed his example, marrying the young school teacher, Phoebe Shay, and also erecting a home of his own; so that there was now quite a little settlement of the Armstrongs, with old David as the head of the family.

As the months and years passed children came who called David grandfather; Bob had two boys named Dick and Sam; while Sandy rejoiced in the possession of a sturdy lad, Roger, and a sweet girl who was named Mary, after her Grandmother Armstrong.

When David obtained the tract of land upon which he settled, and which was just outside the limits of St. Louis, he believed that he had done all that was necessary to secure his title to the same. And, as he watched the adjoining settlement augment in size as the years passed on, Mr. Armstrong congratulated himself on having laid a foundation for his family that would bear much valuable fruit in course of time.

The King of France had given this whole tract to certain Frenchmen in consideration of services which they had rendered the Crown; and in turn they had passed portions over to new arrivals as the result of bargains that were struck between them.

But, as frequently happens, there was always a possibility that, in times to come, a missing link might be discovered in the title, calculated to bring about trouble for the possessors.

Here amidst these pleasant surroundings the children of the Armstrong brothers grew up, and began to take their places in the little community of which they were destined to form important units.

As the boys grew older they naturally took

to the same things that had been of such prime importance in the lives of their fathers. Hunting and fishing were of the utmost necessity to these early pioneers, since only by such means were they enabled to provide for many of the family wants. Indeed, but for the bounty of Nature in supplying such vast quantities of game, the task of settling the waste places of our country would have been a much more difficult one than was the case.

Of course, as their two sons grew tall and more manly, Bob and Sandy Armstrong went less and less into the forest, and out upon the waters, contenting themselves with an occasional hunt in the season of laying in "pemmican," as the dried venison and buffalo meat of the Indians was called, for the winter's store. They had plenty to do in developing their farms, for the work in those days was much more exacting than in recent years, when so many labor-saving farm implements are used.

Those who have read the earlier volumes in this series of pioneer books can easily understand that if the two lads, Dick and Roger, resembled their fathers as much as people said, they were a pair of resolute young fellows

when, at about the age of fifteen, we make their acquaintance.

Dick was steady-going, though he could be as quick as a flash should the necessity require. He was more apt to deliberate, and do the right thing, than his younger cousin, Roger, who had inherited his father's, Sandy Armstrong's, impetuous nature, and was inclined to be a little reckless.

Both were good-hearted, manly boys, and blessings to their parents. They had early in life learned many of the secrets of woodcraft as known to those hardy, early pioneers, and could read the signs of the trail as well as most old trappers, accustomed to spending their lives in the wilderness, where danger lurked back of every falling leaf, with hostile Indians, and revengeful French trappers, hovering around.

The English were numerous at the St. Louis settlement, and had, moreover, taken such good measures to fortify the post that no successful foray was ever engineered by the allied tribes of the West looking to its reduction. And as a certain wampum belt, presented to the Armstrong boys by the great sachem, Pontiac, for valuable services which they had rendered to

him,[1] still seemed to possess a potent power over the Sacs, Pottawatomies, Foxes, and other tribes of Indians, the little settlement above St. Louis, on the Missouri, had never once been molested by the redskins, though other places had been attacked from year to year.

It was at this time, with spring only lately passed, that we find the cousins out upon the Missouri, enjoying their favorite occupation, and having such great sport that Roger could hardly be convinced that they should give up the fishing if they hoped to cross the wide river, and reach home, before the threatening storm broke.

It had promised rain nearly all day, which had been a rather hot, muggy one; but, as it seemed to be the finest fishing day they had enjoyed all season, both boys had taken chances in coming out. There were times when the stock of provisions ran rather low at home, since the crops were only getting their early summer growth, and fresh fish would always be acceptable among the Armstrongs.

Roger had so much trouble with his latest capture that Dick brought his to the boat before his cousin could. Perhaps this was be-

[1] See "The Pioneer Boys on the Great Lakes."

cause he went about his task with deliberation; while the other lad, in his eagerness, allowed the heavy fish to drag the line out several times, on account of not being prepared for his sudden rushes.

This fact is only mentioned in a casual way to let the reader understand thus early in the story what the different natures of our two heroes were; for doubtless there will occur many instances when these leading characteristics must stand out most prominently.

"That makes two of the five, Dick!" gasped Roger, as he managed to unhook his capture, and, after once more baiting his stout hook, cast it far out into the rolling stream for a fresh trial.

"Yes," replied the other, who had already allowed his own line to run out to its full limit; "and, if they keep on taking hold as they have been doing, we'll soon have the other three in the dugout. But you never can tell with fish. They stop biting all of a sudden, and nothing you can do will tempt them to start in again."

"There comes another big one, Dick! Oh! isn't it too mean, he just gave a terrible plunge, and broke away. That's bad luck, I'm afraid,"

exclaimed the younger of the fishers, in a disappointed tone.

"And I suppose he was the biggest of the whole lot?" the other remarked with a laugh.

"There, something's at my bait again!" ejaculated Roger, eagerly. "Don't I hope he swallows it, hook and all!"

He braced himself for the tug, having learned what tremendous pullers these so-called buffalo fish of the rivers could be, when they had the whole force of the current back of their efforts. A few seconds later his line gave a sudden jerk.

"Hurrah! I've got my second one, and that makes three!" he whooped gleefully, as he started to pull in hand over hand, for they were not fishing with poles, and such things as reels were unknown among the early settlers of the West.

Half way did Roger drag his expected prize in, when he uttered a dismal cry.

"He's gone, Dick, worse luck!" he exclaimed in a disappointed tone. "Perhaps there's something wrong with the barb of my hook, they seem to get off so easy of late; I'd better be looking after it. Anyhow, the bait must be gone, and I never yet caught a fish

with a bare hook. Hope you have better luck with yours,'' as Dick started pulling his line in, with something that wriggled tremendously at the other end.

'' All of which,'' remarked the other boy, with a smile, '' goes to show that, as Grandfather Armstrong says, it's poor policy to count your chickens before they're hatched; and a fish on the hook isn't always a fish in the boat. Look what I've caught! ''

'' An eel, and a big one at that! '' exclaimed Roger, looking up from examining the point of his hook, which he found to be in excellent condition after all, so that the fault, if any there was, did not lie there, but possibly in his manner of giving the wriggling fish too much slack line. '' Better knock him on the head before you take him in, because a slippery customer like that will soon own the whole boat, and drive us over the side, if he gets to whipping around.''

This was good advice, as Dick well knew, and, picking up a billet of wood which they used to dispatch their fish in a humane way when caught, he finally succeeded in killing the large fresh-water eel.

But, somehow, that seemed to put an end to

the fishing, for, although they tried the most tempting bait, they did not get another nibble. Even the big yellow catfish, for which the Missouri has always been famous, some of them running up to sixty pounds, declined to bite.

Dick grew anxious at the delay, and several times hinted to his cousin that it would be the part of wisdom for them to give up, even though they still lacked three fish. But it was a difficult task to drag Roger from anything he had set out to do, and he kept reminding the other that they had set a limit of five fish, and that the fish were apt to take hold again at any minute; he was sure he had felt a cautious nibble at his bait just then, and, given another chance, they could easily haul in three more, big or little, it mattered not.

Suddenly a gust of wind came sweeping across the river, and made the dugout rock violently. Looking up, the boys saw that already the breeze was whipping the surface of the Missouri into whitecaps, as the squall rushed across.

"We've waited too long, Roger, you see!" declared Dick, calmly; "and now we've got to find some sort of shelter from the storm, on this side of the river!"

CHAPTER II

THE HOLLOW TREE REFUGE

"ALL my fault, Dick!" said Roger, as they hastened to pull in their lines, and then get the rude anchor up, for their position was an exposed one, with that furious wind sweeping all the way from the other shore of the wide river.

"Don't say anything about it, Roger; what we want to do now is to get to work, and use the paddles. Quick! or we'll be blown over, with the side of our boat exposed to that rush of wind!"

They worked with all their power to get the rough dugout headed for the shore in time to have the wind behind them, for they had been fishing some distance from the wooded bank. The boat had been fashioned from a selected log by the boys themselves, and was as good a specimen of its kind as any of the settlers owned; but at the best such a craft is apt to prove clumsy at a time when quick action is required.

As a result the wind struck them before they were quite prepared, and for a moment it looked as though the frail craft would be capsized, so violently was it tossed by the gusts, as well as by the turbulent waters.

"Dip deep, Roger!" shouted Dick, compelled to raise his voice on account of the roar of the wind, which sounded as though a million bumblebees had swarmed around their heads.

They bent themselves to the task, and put all their energies into keeping the dugout from upsetting. Perhaps the wind was merciful, too, and relaxed its violence a trifle, but, be that as it may, the two lads succeeded in accomplishing the feat of turning the boat head on toward the shore, and with only a few strokes of the paddles they found themselves driven violently against the high bank, against which the waves were already breaking.

"Just below, there's a little bight, where the boat can hold out against it, if only we can get her there!" Dick called aloud; for he had noticed all these things while fishing, perhaps with an eye to future use should necessity compel them to seek a haven of refuge.

"Together, then, Dick, fend off, and let her float down a little!" cried Roger, ready to

jump overboard if necessary in order to save the boat, together with the fine catch of fish, from being turned over by the waves.

But the distance was very short, and so sturdily did the two boys labor that in the end they were able to push their craft around a high point of rock that jutted out from the shore, and find a haven just behind, in which the boat might weather the storm in safety.

But, from the appearance of the darkened sky across the river, it was evident that they might expect a heavy downpour of rain shortly; and, if they hoped to escape getting soaked, they had better go ashore without delay, and seek some sort of shelter.

"Will our fish be safe here, do you think?" asked Roger, loth to leave their prizes unguarded in the boat.

"Oh! I guess so; but come along, we can't stay here. Pick up your gun and let's look for a couple of hollow trees, or a fallen one that will shelter us beneath its roots. Hurry, Roger, it'll soon be on us!"

They had quickly tied the painter of the dugout canoe and, with one last anxious look at the fish, Roger scrambled up the bank at the heels of his cousin.

The guns the boys carried were, of course, the long-barreled rifles of the times, equipped with a flint lock and powder-pan. Although such weapons may excite more or less amusement in these days of the repeating rifle, and the hammerless shotgun, still those men of the old border, with their steady hands and hawk-like vision, were capable of doing marvelous execution with them. And as boys learned how to shoot before they were as tall as the guns owned by their sires, it can be readily understood that both the Armstrong lads were splendid marksmen.

The woods along the banks of the Missouri in those days were untouched by the axe of the backwoodsman, and must have been a sight, indeed, with many of the trees three or more feet through the butt.

Here and there one of these forest monarchs had been felled by some hurricane that had swept through the region in years that were past; and it was in the direction of these that the boys cast eager glances in the hope of finding a shelter from the downpour that threatened.

Right and left they glanced, missing nothing with those keen eyes, now put to their best ef-

forts, since a necessity for a haven had arisen, if they hoped to avoid being soaked to the skin. And, as they both were dressed in tanned buckskin garments, fashioned after the manner customary with the hunters of that early day, with fringe and colored porcupine quills adorning both trousers and tunic, the task of drying their clothes was one that would take more or less time.

It seemed but a few minutes before a shout from Roger announced a happy discovery.

"Oh! look, there's the very place for us, if we can climb the tree and crawl in at that opening, Dick! On my word I believe that's the biggest hollow tree I ever ran across, and I've seen a few. Shall we try it?"

Cautious Dick glanced once more around him; but apparently could see no other opportunity to get away from the threatening deluge.

"All right, then, we'll have to chance it!" he replied, as he started for the big tree.

Roger did not understand what these words meant until they had come to the wide trunk of the oak and he discovered many scratches there, indicating that some wild animal must have its sleeping quarters in the hollow above.

"A bear's den, Dick!" he ejaculated, looking at his companion doubtfully.

"Yes, I guessed as much," answered the other, "when I saw tracks over yonder. But let's hope the old fellow happens to be away just now. I wouldn't take the risk did not those black clouds look so threatening."

"Shall we climb up, then?" asked the other, ready to accept any risk, in his headstrong way.

"Yes, come on, Roger; but keep your gun ready for business," replied Dick.

It was always a matter of some concern to the early pioneers, this keeping their rifles or muskets in condition for immediate use. The powder was apt to be shaken from the pan, or the flint in the hammer dislodged just enough to keep it from striking fairly, and sending out the important spark, which was absolutely necessary in order that the weapon be discharged. And hence, under the most intense excitement, hunters were wont to keep a watchful eye upon their guns in order that they might not fail.

Both boys scrambled up the tree. The limbs were low, and fashioned just right for a quick ascent, and, as the hole which had caught the

eye of Roger was not more than twenty feet from the ground, they were beside it in an exceedingly short space of time.

But it might be noticed that neither seemed in any great haste to enter the gaping aperture that frowned so darkly before them. They could easily tell that it was a bear's den from the odor that greeted them, such as may always be detected where wild animals have their lodging; but even stout-hearted Roger would have braved the wrath of the coming deluge rather than drop down upon a savage bear.

"Do you think he's in, right now, Dick?" he questioned.

"I don't know. You see there was no time to examine the tracks below, and see whether the last ones headed in, or out. But we'll soon learn that. Fire your gun as straight down into the stump as you can, Roger; while I keep mine ready to give him a shot if he comes out."

"A good idea, Dick; and here goes!"

Roger pushed his long rifle into the hole as well as he could, and, aiming downward, pulled the trigger. The roar that followed was terrific in that confined space, and Roger hastily dragged his gun out, preparing to reload. He had in his early years been taught the first

principle among hunters, that an empty gun is worse than none at all.

Dick was waiting, ready to send a bullet into the head of Bruin, did he but make his appearance; but, as nothing followed the report of his cousin's rifle, he bent forward to look once more into the black aperture.

"Not at home, is he, Dick; or do you think I could have been lucky enough to have killed him by a chance shot?" demanded Roger, hopefully.

"Oh! no danger of that," replied the other, laughingly. "It's an empty den that we've run across, and the sooner we crawl inside the better."

"Yes," said Roger, "I felt a big splash of rain on my face then. But how far down do you think the hole goes, Dick? I hope not all the way to the roots of the old tree. How could we climb up again; and what a tumble it would be if we let go and dropped."

For answer Dick dropped a piece of heavy bark into the opening, and bent his ear in an endeavor to tell from the sound just about how far it had to fall.

"I think it's all right, Roger," he said; "but to make sure I'm going to tie to this

branch this piece of rope that I brought with me, and lower it inside. Then we can always have something to pull ourselves up with."

"It takes you to think up such things," was the comment of the other boy, who greatly admired his cousin's thoughtfulness, though seldom able to shine in that same respect himself.

Giving his gun in charge of Roger while he worked, the older lad quickly tied one end of his piece of rope to the limb alongside the opening.

"Now we can climb in, and none too soon, for there comes the rain with a whoop that sounds like an Indian attack!" he remarked.

Dick would have gone first, but it would never do for headstrong Roger to allow any one to precede him, when there was an atom of danger to face. So he swung in, and blocked the passage of the other, though with a good-natured laugh.

He had shifted his rifle to his back by means of the strap that was attached to it for that very purpose. This allowed him to have both hands free. Having dropped down so that he was hanging from the rim of the opening, Roger failed to touch the bottom with his dangling feet.

"I don't seem to make it, Dick," he called out; "but now I'm going to try the rope. Hurrah! here's the bottom at last; and I judge that it's only about eight feet or so below the opening. Coming down, now?"

"Yes, because here's the rain pouring down; keep out of the way, Roger," with which remark the older boy started down.

He found no difficulty in landing beside his cousin. The big tree was hollow half-way down to its roots, so that hardly more than a mere shell of the outside remained.

"Listen to it come down, Dick!" exclaimed the younger lad, presently. "Sounds as if the clouds had broken above, and meant to put the river up to the flood stage again, after it had started to go down. And the wind blows pretty hard, too. I hope, now, it doesn't knock this old oak over, and give us heaps of trouble. Wasn't that thunder I heard? What if lightning should strike here? Perhaps we were foolish to try so hard to escape a ducking, Dick. There may be some things worse than a wet jacket, it seems to me."

"That's right, Roger, and I'm glad you look at it that way; but we're in here now, and perhaps we'd better stay, and take our chances.

Such a storm will soon be over; and, when the wind goes down some, we can paddle across the Missouri without running the risk of a bad spill. We promised mother not to take too many chances, because she dreads the water, after losing her brother the way she did in the drifting ice three years ago this spring."

The wind howled dismally around them, and the rain beat heavily against the thin shell of the tree, so that at times it creaked and groaned in a way that excited the fears of Roger anew, for he thought it might be about to give up its long fight, and yield to the storm's fury.

But Dick kept his courage up by words of good cheer.

"Already I think the worst is over," he returned. "It seems to me the noise does not come quite so heavily; and yes, when you look up, Roger, you can even see light at the opening, something that I couldn't do before. We'll have to wait here a little while, and then we can crawl out to hunt up our boat, and start for the settlement on the other shore."

Roger naturally twisted his neck in order to see the glad sight of daylight above; but immediately gave expression to a cry.

"What is it?" asked Dick, knowing from the tone of his cousin's exclamation that he had seen something that meant new trouble for them.

"The bear, Dick!" gasped the other boy.

"What about him?" demanded Dick; but doubtless he was able to make a pretty good guess concerning the nature of the discovery.

"He just stuck his snout into the hole as if he smelled us; and look there, will you? All the light is shut out! Dick, what shall we do? For I believe the bear is starting to back down inside the tree!"

CHAPTER III

A SHADOW OVER THE HOMESTEAD

THERE was no such thing as catching Dick unprepared. No doubt he had before now considered just what should be done in such an emergency.

Even while the excited Roger was speaking, Dick had acted. Of course the only thing that could be done in order to give the descending bear a fright was to fire a shot into his hindquarters at close range. No bear could stand that, Dick felt certain. The only thing that gave the boy cause for concern was that the animal might have pushed into the opening so far that, in his alarm, he would lose his grip above, and come down upon them, crushing both under his weight.

The report of Dick's rifle sounded like a peal of thunder. There was a tremendous clawing noise above, and, for a brief interval, Dick's heart was in his throat.

Then the clawing ceased inside the hollow

tree, and, at the same time, Roger's voice rang out.

"He's climbed out in a bigger hurry than he came in, Dick! You gave him a pain that time. He must think hornets have built a nest in his old den, and you won't get that smart bear coming back here in a hurry again. There, I heard him strike the ground! Perhaps you hit him harder than you meant to, Dick, and we might get him for the larder, if we wanted!"

"Not much chance of that when I had only his hindquarters to shoot into," the other declared; "but, all the same, he's skipped out, and taken to the woods. What's a little rain to a furry coat like his, after sleeping all winter? But one thing is sure, Roger, the rain is slackening up."

"Yes," added the other, "and the wind, too; for it doesn't howl as it did. But, let me tell you, I'm glad that thunder doesn't growl so much now. When that loud crash came I got a bad scare, because I thought how lightning likes to pick out a big oak like this, and splinter it from top to bottom."

"You wouldn't have known what hurt you, if it had struck this tree; and there's a little satisfaction in that, Roger. But, when I get

my gun loaded, I mean to climb up, and take an observation."

"How lucky that we've got that rope to help out," remarked Roger; "for the inside of this old tree feels as smooth as anything, because the bear has clawed his way up and down so many times. We would have had a hard job getting up, only for that."

"Oh! there are ways, if you only bother thinking them out," observed the other boy. "With two of us down here, one could climb on the shoulders of the other and, after he got out, help his comrade with his hands. Oh! you're off, are you? I wondered if you would wait, and let me go first for a change. But, now that you're half-way up, keep right on, and tell me how things look to you. Be careful how you poke your head out, because, after all, the bear might be waiting for us."

Roger had little difficulty in reaching the opening. He was so nimble that he could climb any tree like a monkey; but, remembering the warning of his cousin, he tried to take an observation before thrusting his head out.

"All clear, here, Dick!" he called, joyfully; "you gave him a scare, let me tell you — chances are he's running yet. And better still,

the clouds have broken across the river, for, would you believe it, the sun's peeping out! Better come up, as the rain's stopped now."

That was good news for the boy in the hollow tree, and he lost no time in following his companion. Presently both were perched upon the wet limbs, looking around.

"You wounded the bear, Dick, for, see, here are blood marks on the bark," cried Roger, pointing as he spoke.

"Which I am sorry for," was the reply, "because I never like to hurt an animal unless I want him for food. And we couldn't think of trying to follow the trail of the bear at this late hour. Mother might be worried if we didn't come home by dark, after such a sudden storm. So let's head back to the boat, and, if the waves have gone down enough, we'll push out for the other bank."

"Whew! did you ever see such big bear tracks, Dick?" exclaimed Roger, as he bent down to examine the imprints. "The chances are, now, we'll never set eyes on anything to beat that in all our lives again;" but, when the boy made that statement, and believed what he was saying, too, he could not possibly foresee the time when he and his cousin would look

upon the distant Rocky Mountains, just then almost unknown to white men, and view that greatest of all bears, the terrible grizzly of the foothills. Yet that experience was before them, and nearer than any one could dream.

"Come on, we had better be in a hurry, Roger," the other called out; "because already it is getting pretty close to sunset, and with so many clouds overhead, darkness is apt to come along soon afterwards. And you know it isn't safe upon the big river after night sets in."

They were quickly at the little cove where the dugout had been left, and, much to their satisfaction, they found everything all right.

"I'm glad that bear didn't get a scent of our fish while he was hurrying home," Dick remarked.

"That's so," the other boy added, "because we happen to know how hungry they are for fish, lots of times. Didn't we see one scoop a fish out with his paw, once, as he squatted on a log that ran down into the water? But are we going to risk it out there on the river just yet, Dick?"

"It looks pretty rough, I declare; but the waves are going down every minute, so we had better wait a while. Given half an hour, and

we ought to be able to cross. The longer we can hold off, the easier our passage will be."

"I suppose it's no use throwing out a line again?" mused Roger, whose passion for fishing could never be wholly satisfied.

"Not after such a heavy rain, and with the river rising as it is, Roger. You know enough about fish to remember that they never bite after a rain that washes all sorts of feed into the river, and muddies the water so. Here, we can sit down on this rock, and talk a little."

"Yes, and Dick, I know that you have something on your mind that's been worrying you all day. More than once I've come near asking what ailed you, and then I held my tongue for fear I might offend. And at our house I notice that father and mother seem worried, too, for they often stop talking when I come in, and look confused, as if they didn't want me to know what was wrong. Now, if you know, tell me. We're pretty well grown, and ought to take some of the burdens on our shoulders, it seems to me."

"Well spoken, Roger, and shake hands with me on that!" exclaimed the older lad, while his sober face lighted up with a mingling of regard for his cousin, and delight over hearing these

words spring from his heart. "Yes, you are right, we *are* old enough to be taken into the councils of our parents; and my father has thought the same, for he told me the nature of the gloom that seems to be hanging over the whole little Armstrong settlement of late."

"And will you tell me, Dick?" demanded the other, eagerly, while a look akin to resolution flashed over his handsome face. Roger was his father in his younger years over again; a real "chip of the old block," gentle-hearted, brave, and with only the fault of recklessness to mar his good record.

Sandy Armstrong in early life had taken as his model that sterling young borderer known in the history of the "dark and bloody ground," Kentucky, as Daniel Boone's most beloved helper, Simon Kenton; and, as their natures were very much alike, the reason for his admiration had always been very evident.

"Yes," Dick went on to say, bravely, "because my father said he thought both of us should know; not that he had any idea we could do anything to help; but, if the blow fell, we might be better prepared to stand it."

"Blow fell!" repeated the other, in sheer astonishment, while his ruddy face lost a little

of its color; "why, what can you mean, Dick? Are the Indians going on the warpath; or has that precious wampum belt been lost again, as father told me once happened when he was a boy?"[1]

"No, it is nothing like that, Roger," replied the other. "It concerns the title to the property our parents bought years ago, and which has been our home all of our lives, up to now."

"Why, you surprise me, Dick! They bought it, I have heard, from the French traders who owned the section across the river, the pick of the land above the St. Louis settlement."

"Yes, that is a fact, Roger; but it seems that there is some sort of defect in the title, and an old French trader, François Lascelles by name, with his grown son, Alexis, has threatened to turn us out of our homes by the first of next year, unless we make a new settlement with him, and purchase the ground for a second time. It seems, however, that there is just one way by which the land may be saved."

"Oh! I am glad to hear that; and if there is anything that I can do, only tell me, and see how quickly I will do it. But it would nearly kill my mother to lose the farm how, because

[1] See "The Pioneer Boys of the Mississippi."

she loves the place so much. Now, tell me what that one thing is."

"Listen. It seems that there is a man whose signature to certain papers is necessary in order to keep this rascal of a Frenchman from seizing the property by the first of next year. His name is Jasper Williams, and he is a hunter and scout very much like Daniel Boone, the friend of our parents. Both your father and mine have been to great trouble trying to locate this man, and, Roger, think of the bitter disappointment that overwhelmed them upon discovering a few days ago that he is far away in the unknown West, but expects to join the Lewis and Clark exploration party that started out many weeks ago, bound to cross prairies and mountains, and rivers and lakes if necessary, until they finally set eyes on the Pacific Ocean, which we know lies hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles away from the Mississippi."

Roger shook his head, as if overwhelmed with sadness.

"Why, they may not be back again for two years, even if they escape the thousand and one perils they must encounter from wild beasts, hostile Sioux and Blackfeet Indians, snow pit-

falls in the mountains, starvation on the deserts, and all sorts of other things. Oh! Dick, what a cruel thing this is. And it could all be changed, you say, if only that one man's signature might be obtained to a certain paper?"

"Yes, so father tells me. And, Roger, do you know what I have been thinking of all this day, while we sat, and fished, and watched the coming of the storm?"

His impulsive cousin glanced up at him quickly, an eager glow in his eyes and a set look on his young face.

"Dick, were you thinking that *we* might start out, and try to overtake that expedition which President Jefferson has sent to see what our new territory between the river and the ocean is like? (Note 2.) Tell me, would such an idea ever enter the head of so cautious a fellow as Dick Armstrong when it might seem to be only fit for a madcap like myself?"

"Ah! yes! but, Roger, think what the signing of that paper would mean to all those we love! Remember that, unless something is done, we may lose our homes before another spring, and our parents must start all over again. And, if you stop and think, did not our

fathers once make almost as dangerous a journey into the unknown country of the Iroquois Indians, at the time our Aunt Kate, their sister, was stolen by a young chief? "

"Yes, yes, every word you say is true, Dick; but the daring of it all staggers me. Do not think for a second that I will hold back, if only we can gain the consent of our parents to making the trial. Think of starting out into that wonderful unknown wilderness, where white men have never until now placed a foot, following in the track of Captain Lewis and Captain Clark, with their little band of soldiers and scouts, not more than forty souls, all told. Oh! let us get back across the river right away, Dick, because I want to beg my father to let me go; and get grandfather to back us up, for he says we are chips of the old blocks, and able to hold our own anywhere."

"Well, the wind has fallen enough, I think, for us to make the trial; so jump into the dug-out, and we'll paddle for the other shore, Roger."

CHAPTER IV

THE CABIN OF BOB ARMSTRONG

There was still danger in crossing the broad river in so small a boat as the clumsy dugout; so that the two lads had to be constantly on their guard against being caught broadside on, when the waves and wind united to beat against their craft.

Fortunately their voyage was almost in the teeth of the elements, and they were not compelled to expose the side of the boat.

Dick always sat in the stern, as he was considered the captain and pilot, being better able to judge of what was proper to do in emergencies than Roger, since there was always a chance of the latter becoming confused, as he himself very frankly admitted.

On this occasion Roger was wild with impatience to get home. What his cousin had just told him had excited him more than anything he had ever heard; and the wonderful prospect that opened to them, if they could obtain the



"ONCE EVEN DICK'S BEST WORK COULD NOT PREVENT THE DUG-OUT FROM TURNING PARTLY, SO AS TO EXPOSE A SIDE TO THE WIND."

consent of their parents to follow after the President's expedition in search of the distant Pacific, known only to Balboa's party long, long before, thrilled him.

No doubt it affected his paddling to some extent, for Dick noticed that he dipped deeper, and made more vigorous strokes, than he could ever remember Roger doing. In fact, he was put to his best efforts to counteract the "swing" that these furious efforts on the part of the head paddler gave the boat.

Once even Dick's best work could not prevent the dugout from turning partly, so as to expose a side to the wind, and they came very near capsizing.

"Careful, Roger! Not so much ginger in your stroke! We'll get there in good time, if only you keep up a steady gait. There are no Indians after us, and the supper horn has not blown yet, that I have heard!" Thus Dick chided his impetuous cousin.

After that the other lad, as though himself realizing the folly of allowing his excitement to have such sway over his actions, managed to moderate his speed and they had no more trouble.

Besides, the nearer the boat drew to land,

the more shelter they obtained from the fact that the shore was covered with trees, which broke the force of the wind, so that presently they were in comparatively calm waters.

They ran their boat upon a shelving beach, where it was usually kept when the stage of water permitted. The painter was secured to a stake that had been driven into the ground, after which the two boys climbed the bank, and headed for home.

"After you've had a talk with your parents, when supper is done, get them to come over to grandfather's cabin for a grand powwow," said Dick, as he and Roger were about to separate.

"That's a good idea," replied the other; "and, if ever I wished for anything in all my life, it's that they may say 'yes.' I'll never be happy unless they do, because it would be a glorious thing if we could find that man, Jasper Williams, and get his signature to the paper that will save our homes."

Dick was a boy of few words. He seldom gave expression to his feelings after the more boisterous manner of his cousin, but the hearty grip which he gave Roger's hand at parting was more expressive than words, and the other

boy knew that his own sentiments were echoed in the heart of his companion.

There were three log cabins not far from each other in the clearing. The middle one of these belonged to Grandfather David Armstrong, the original settler of the place, while, on either side, his two sons, at the time of their marriages, had built homes of a similar type.

They had secured a grant of land that embraced many rich acres, and which, when the settlement of St. Louis grew in size, would become more and more valuable. Knowing this fact, then, it can be seen how the prospect of having their land taken away by a defect in the title affected the Armstrongs, young and old.

Dick strode straight to his own cabin home. He was carrying with him as many of the fish as he could well manage, and expected to send his younger brother, Sam, back to the boat to get the balance of what they had caught.

The night was just settling down, though it would not be dark for some time yet, as the long days had come in with the month of June, which was now not far from its close.

In the west the glow of the sunset still lingered and once again did Dick Armstrong

stop for a brief interval to stare at the touches of gold and crimson that flecked the heavens. No doubt the lad was vaguely wondering whether he and his cousin would be allowed to start forth to pierce that unknown wilderness lying under that mysterious sky; and, if so, what wonderful sights might they not set eyes on during the weeks and months of their absence, while trying to find Jasper Williams!

Some such strange thoughts must have been passing through his mind, for he gave vent to a long-drawn sigh as he once more started for the cabin, from the small windows of which shone a cheery light.

Even as he drew near, the door opened, and the form of a woman was outlined as she stood there, evidently looking out into the gloaming. It was Dick's mother, anxious, as any good mother would be, concerning her boy, who might have been upon the wild and riotous Missouri at the time that summer squall first broke.

"Is that you, Dick?" she called out eagerly, seeing a figure approaching.

"Yes, mother," came the reply; "we had to wait till the waves went down some, before trying to cross; because, you see, the old dug-

out is a clumsy thing in a heavy sea. But we came over without shipping much water, and with plenty of fish. I'll leave them in the shed here, and wash up before I come in."

But, before doing so, Dick, who knew how anxious his mother must have been during the gale, went up and kissed her.

A short time later he entered the house. The interior of the cabin was like all of its kind. To the boys of the present generation it would doubtless have seemed a very poor makeshift for a home, since so many of the comforts to which they are accustomed were lacking; but in the eyes of Dick Armstrong it meant everything; and with father, mother, and his brother, Sam, present, he could wish for nothing more.

The fire burned brightly on the wide hearth, where the simple supper was cooking. From the heavy rafters overhead hung strings of herbs, and onions, and such things as the good housewife of those days deemed necessary for the welfare of her household. There was also a ham, home-cured; and some strips of dried venison, buffalo meat and even portions of a young bear that Dick had shot during the preceding fall.

White dimity curtains at the windows gave the room a homelike air. The younger boy was oiling several traps that he meant to store away until, with the coming of the crisp frosty air, the next season for taking pelts would have arrived. The father, who has been known in earlier stories concerning this pioneer family as Bob Armstrong, was engaged in reading a newspaper from the Far East that had come to old David, and was such a rarity that it was passed from hand to hand, until decrepit from age and much handling.

Bob had developed into a sturdy man. As has been stated before, he had married the daughter of another settler, whose home was in St. Louis; and made both a good husband and a kind father. Being industrious, he was by degrees developing the farm that had come to him as his share of the grant secured by David Armstrong from the French company owning a greater part of the land around the new settlement. Even now they were getting good crops, and had a barn in which these could be stored.

Taken all in all, this Armstrong settlement was the most thrifty within fifty miles; and people who saw the fields of grain, as well as the animals raised upon the several farms,

said that David and his two sons deserved great credit for their persistent energy.

Evidently supper had been waiting on account of the absence of the older boy, for Mrs. Armstrong immediately began serving it, piping hot. If there was not a great variety on the board, at least one could not complain on account of the quantity.

Bob was impatient to hear an account of the fishing excursion, and while the meal went on Dick entertained them all with the story of how he and his cousin happened on the den of the bear in the big hollow oak and, seeking refuge from the storm there, had been surprised by the return of the owner, with the result that they were compelled to treat Mr. Bear rather meanly in order to induce him not to crowd in on them.

Young Sam laughed heartily as he heard the particulars; and even Bob seemed to be vastly amused. No doubt it brought many a similar scene back to his mind, connected with those days in the past when two other boys, himself and his brother Sandy, roamed the woods and valleys in search of game, and met with many surprising adventures by field and flood.

Dick purposely refrained from saying a word

concerning the bold scheme which he and Roger had conceived, until after the meal was over.

Mrs. Armstrong was washing up the dishes, and Sam still busily engaged with his traps, with which he and Dick had done good work during the previous winter, when, unable to hold in any longer, Dick sprung his surprise.

"Father, there's something I want to talk with you about," he began; and Bob, realizing from the sober tone in which his son spoke that it could be no trifling matter, laid down the paper, and looked at the boy's flushed face.

"Well, what is it, Dick?" he asked, uneasily; while the mother stopped her work to glance up, and even Sam laid his trap down on the floor, and listened.

"While we were sitting there on the shore, waiting for the wind to quiet down a bit, so we could take chances and cross over, Roger and I got to talking. I told him all you said to me about the shadow that has fallen on our homes here, and, father, Roger, in his impetuous way, declared that we ought to follow up the Lewis and Clark company, to find that man, Jasper Williams, and get his signature to the paper that will save our land from being taken away. And, father, as I heard Roger say that, some-

thing in me seemed to rise up and declare that such was our duty. I promised him to get you to go over to Grandfather Armstrong's cabin after supper, where we could have a council of war, and see if something could not be done to let us two go on this mission!"

When Dick stopped speaking a silence fell upon them all. Father and mother exchanged quick glances, and there were tears in their eyes.

CHAPTER V

A GRAND PALAVER

"OH! Dick, my boy, we could not let you go from us in that way!"

Of course Dick had expected that his mother would say something like this; but he looked more to his father for the consent that would mean so much. The very thought was staggering to those loving hearts; but in those days boys of fifteen and sixteen were so accustomed to thinking and doing for themselves that they were fully trusted by their elders. And, besides, mothers had been brought up in the hard school of experience, thus learning early in life to look upon danger as an ever-present thing.

If his father could be brought to see the desperate undertaking in the right light, Dick knew that the victory was as good as won; for the former would be able to convince the good wife and mother that it was, after all, a reasonable conclusion, as well as the sole hope of saving their imperiled homes.

Bob Armstrong shook his head, even while his eyes grew dim as they rested on Dick's eager face.

"God knows, your mother and I understand and appreciate the motive that prompts you to say that, my boy," he said; "but we could not accept the sacrifice that it would mean. If there is no other way to save our farms, then they must go, and we will have to take up some new land, and start in afresh."

"But, father, why should you feel that way?" the lad went on to say. "Can you not trust me in the woods? Have I ever failed to take every precaution, and up to now has anything serious ever happened to me?"

"No, it is not that, son," replied Bob; "a man could not wish to have a better boy than you have always been, and I wager you know more woodcraft right now than either your Uncle Sandy or myself had in our heads at your age. But it would not be right for us to stay comfortably at home here, while our sons were meeting with all manner of perils off in that unknown country."

Dick smiled on hearing that. He believed that, if there was no stronger argument against the venture, his case was already as good as

won. And, having thought it all out, he now proceeded to knock away the props from under the structure founded by his father.

"Please look back, father, to your own boyhood days," he said, soberly. "How many times have you sat there, and told us of how you and Uncle Sandy started out by yourselves on the trail of that young Iroquois chief who carried Aunt Kate away. Yes, you followed him clear to the Great Lakes, to the country that was teeming with enemies. And, in spite of every peril, you and my uncle, with only the help of that old trapper Pat O'Mara, since gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds, and the friendly Indian, Blue Jacket, did rescue Aunt Kate, and even saved the life of Pontiac, who afterwards gave you the magic wampum belt that has kept us from harm all these years. Father, what I am saying is all true, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, every word of it, my son; but, then, the conditions were different at that time," replied the other, hastily. "Our sister had been carried off, my father was far away on the road to Virginia on important business, and there was no one else to go in search of Kate, so brother Sandy and myself *had* to start out."

"Ah! yes, but you went willingly, eagerly, I know, father, just as we feel like doing now," the boy went on.

"But the life and happiness of our only sister was at stake, Dick," the father said, and yet in a half hesitating way, as though the argument of the boy was already beginning to have its effect.

"Well, the future happiness of *three* families is at stake now, father. And if in those days you and Uncle Sandy could face the perils of the wilderness, and win out, why should not Roger and I do the same now? All we would have to do would be to follow up the course of the river, week after week, until we caught the expedition; and then keep on with them until Jasper Williams joined them, as he expects to do by the time they reach the Mandan country. After that, having secured his signature to the paper, we could bring it back to you. Why, what could be easier than that? And think of all it means to us, father!"

"Yes, yes, I understand, Dick, and Heaven knows I feel like giving my consent. But it is no light matter, to be settled off-hand in a minute. I have your mother's feelings to consider. She would be loath to see you leave us,

and plunge into that unknown country that lies toward the setting sun.''

"But, father, I have heard you say many times that you often had a longing yourself to go there, and if you were not the head of a family the temptation might have been more than you could stand. Yes, and Uncle Sandy echoed your words, and looked forlorn for a whole day, as though he had to fight with the desire to once more become a pioneer, and explore new countries.''

Bob Armstrong smiled, and glanced toward his wife, who shook her head, not trusting herself to speech. But Dick felt encouraged, and believed he had made great progress toward gaining the consent of both parents.

There remained one trump card to play — Grandfather Armstrong, who always sympathized with his grandsons in their ambitions, and who would be apt to look back to those days when he, as a father, trusted his own sons in every undertaking that could happen in the lives of young pioneers along the Ohio and the Mississippi.

"By now, Uncle Sandy and Roger must be over at Grandfather Armstrong's cabin; and I promised that we would meet them there for

a talk. You will not object to hearing what he has to say, father, I hope?" Dick went on.

"I can see what the result will be if Grandfather takes a hand in it," remarked Bob, with a shrug of his shoulders; "but then, it seems to be a case of 'old men for council; young men for war,' and we surely ought to listen to what he has to say of the project, after he has heard both sides."

The younger boy, Sam, who had been listening to all this amazing talk with eagerness, now broke in with:

"But I can shoot a rifle as well as Dick, and know lots about trailing, and all those things Pat O'Mara used to teach me before he died; why must I stay at home if Dick goes, father?"

"That would never do!" declared Dick, immediately. "Mother could not stand the absence of both her boys at the same time. Who would do the hunting and fishing then, while father worked the farm? Where would the meat come from, Sam? No; if I go, you must take my place, and show what you can do. Besides, while you are strong for your years, a boy of twelve could hardly expect to keep up

with those who are so much older. Oh! no, it would not do at all."

Sam was inclined to protest, but he saw his mother's grieved face; and something there seemed to give his heart a wrench. Perhaps it was the thought of being separated from her by hundreds of miles of wilderness, never, perhaps, to see her again in this life; for, after all, Sam was only a very young boy, and he had not been tried so severely as his father and uncle in their early days.

" Oh, well, I suppose I'll have to stay home, and take your place, Dick; but some fine day I mean to see that Golden West for myself, remember that," he said, and, somehow, his taking it for granted that the parents' consent was sure to be given to his brother's daring project did more to hasten the decision than anything that had as yet occurred.

" Come," remarked Bob, " let us all go to Grandfather Armstrong's, and talk it over. I want to see what Sandy thinks, before I make up my mind; " but Dick knew from his father's manner that already he had been partly won over.

So they all trooped out, and were soon entering the central cabin.

David Armstrong was now getting quite old. Thirty years had passed since he came down the Ohio on a flatboat, seeking a new home in the wilderness; and his hair was as white as the snows that came with each succeeding winter. He was not able to do much manual labor himself, but hired help to look after his extensive holdings, that already had increased ten times in value, and would be worth a fortune later on, if they could only manage to retain possession of them.

Evidently the old man and his wife had been told of the bold proposition which Dick and Roger had made, for his dimmed eyes rested fondly on his other grandson as Dick entered the big cabin.

David loved these boys even as he had his own sons. He had watched their growth into young manhood, and in every way fostered their good traits. And, knowing what they were capable of doing, if any one was able to decide whether they could be entrusted with such a dangerous mission it should be Grandfather Armstrong.

Sandy was almost as sturdy a man as his brother Bob, and his wife was a fine helpmeet for a pioneer. There was none her equal in all

that region when it came to putting up sweets for the long winter season and in carrying out the numerous responsibilities that a housewife in those times had to take upon her shoulders.

But just now Phoebe Armstrong seemed dumb with the dread that had seized her, after hearing what an undertaking her only boy proposed embarking upon.

Aunt Kate, too, was there, a buxom young woman, who had helped to mother all the children of her two brothers as they came along; and now took upon herself many of the duties that were proving too arduous for her mother, not so strong as in the years long gone by. And the last member of the group was little Mary, Sandy's daughter, a winsome child of seven, with flaxen hair, and eyes rivaling the blue skies and who, as already mentioned, had been named after Grandmother Armstrong.

And then the grand "powwow," as Roger called it, began, the boys stating their case, and begging hard to be allowed to carry out the plan they had set their hearts on. Both fathers also entered into the discussion, but the mothers only listened, rather white of face, but evidently willing that such an important matter should be settled by the heads of the houses.

All the while Grandfather Armstrong sat there, smoking his long pipe, and listening to what was said. And after all had been argued, fathers and boys seemed to turn toward the old man for a decision.

Removing his pipe, David Armstrong looked around at the row of eager as well as anxious faces, and, speaking slowly, delivered himself of his decision.

"I think," he said, very solemnly, "that these brave boys should be allowed to show what they are made of, and try to save for their parents the homes we have planted here in this beautiful spot. And so, let them make the venture!"

CHAPTER VI

BAD NEWS

"HAVE you come to tell me what they have decided, Dick?" asked Roger, on the following afternoon, when his cousin overtook him on the river bank, where he had gone to work half-heartedly on a new dugout which the boys were fashioning from an especially fine log selected by Bob himself.

"Yes, father just came in to tell me that he and Uncle Sandy had finally determined that, since we were so set upon trying to save the farms, they could not stand in the way," replied the other, who was almost out of breath.

Roger threw his hat high in the air, and his face broke out in a smile, as he let a whoop escape him that would have done credit to some Pottawatomie brave, eager to go upon the warpath.

"That's the best news you could have brought me, Dick!" he exclaimed. "And how

you fooled me with your long face. My heart seemed to drop away down in my moccasins, because I was afraid they had said 'no.' But I had a heap of faith in Grandfather Armstrong, and he was with us from the beginning. When can we start, Dick? Oh, the hours will drag like lead till we are off! Not that I won't suffer because of leaving mother and father and all the rest; but it means so much to everybody. And, Dick, do you think we will succeed? Can we overtake Captain Lewis, after he's had so long a start? And will Jasper Williams be there to sign that paper? ''

His cousin laughed at the flood of eager questions.

'' One at a time, Roger,'' he remarked, holding the other at arms' length. '' They will not think of letting us off under two days, because our mothers will want to get so many things ready for us to take. But what does a little delay matter, when we know that we are going to take the great trip? Think of how every boy in the settlement will envy us, and wish he could go along. But this is too serious a business to think of taking any company with us. They would not have anything at stake, and might feel like backing down when troubles came,

while we do not mean to let anything hold us back."

Roger turned, and looked toward the west. That was always the "unknown country" to the American pioneer, even when the first of them climbed the Alleghanies, and from their tops saw the sun sink behind the forests beyond. It held mysteries that the eyes of white men had as yet never rested upon. Could there be a more enticing prospect to lure adventurous lads forward than this piercing of the wilderness, day after day, moving ever onward toward the distant shore of the Pacific, of which they had heard such great stories, handed down from the lips of those who had perhaps gazed upon the western sea in the East Indies; or it might be from the narrow isthmus down where the waves of the Caribbean Sea washed the shores of the Spanish Main.

It was a beautiful day. Fleecy white clouds dotted the blue sky. Here a white-headed eagle soared round and round in great circles, sailing ever upward toward the sun. Far out upon the water a fish-hawk or osprey was hovering with winnowing wing, preparatory to darting down to clutch some unlucky fish in its talons;

after which, possibly, the "lord of the air" might attack the hawk, and force a surrender of the finny prey, after the manner of all eagles, even to this day.

It was a pleasure to breathe the fresh air, and be thankful that one lived. Add to this the realization that a dream was about to come true, such as no boy had ever dared indulge before, and the feelings of Roger Armstrong can be partly understood.

No wonder his boyish face shone with happiness. True, there would be tearful partings from those he loved; but then, his heart was staunch, and he knew he could stand that. And the wonderful mission that beckoned them forward, was not that enough to pay for any trouble and suffering they might meet?

"How do you suppose they will say we ought to follow the expedition, Dick?" he finally found tongue to ask, at the same time casting a dubious look in the direction of the dugout upon which he had been working.

Seeing that look, Dick burst out laughing.

"Well, if it depended on our paddling that heavy craft hundreds and hundreds of miles up the swift current of the Missouri, making a carry every now and then, perhaps, and go-

ing ashore every night to camp, I don't think we'd ever come up with those French Canadian voyageurs who handle the three boats Captain Lewis has with him. You remember how we followed them all one morning when they passed here, and how badly we felt after they had disappeared around the big bend above. And it seems almost too good to be true to think that we are going after them, perhaps to be in their company a long time."

"But answer my question, please, Dick; if not by boat, then how shall we overtake the expedition, which must be a hundred or more miles away by now?"

"There is only one way, Roger. Our fathers have decided that we shall start out with horses, one each to ride, and another for a pack animal, to carry some of the things we may want on the long journey. I did not think we would need these last; but I said nothing, for it pleases our mothers to think that we may carry plenty of good things along. But between us, Roger, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we had to abandon our packhorses before we've been a week on the trail, and trust to the fleetness of our own animals' heels to keep ourselves from being made prisoners by some

of the Indian tribes whose country we have to pass through."

Even this dismal prophecy did not appear to affect the impulsive Roger. Indeed, his eyes sparkled more than ever, as though he rather enjoyed the prospect of being thrown on his own resources. It was going to be a fine opportunity to learn the value of those secrets of woodcraft which he had picked up from time to time.

From the early days of history, the prospect of adventure has appealed to all boys with red blood in their veins. Only for that eagerness, shown by the early pioneers, to pit themselves against the perils of the wilderness, how would our frontier line have been extended, year after year, until it finally broke over the mighty Rockies, and reached the western sea?

"But two whole days," Roger muttered, "they will seem ever so long to me, Dick. I wish it could be to-morrow."

"Oh! but there is plenty to be done, for all of us," replied the more thoughtful lad; "I'll see to it that you have no idle minutes on your hands from this time out. To begin with, Roger, pick up your tools, and bring them to the house. All work on this boat must be put

off until our return, unless Sam chooses, with the help of Grandfather, to finish it, which I rather think will be the case."

They turned their back upon the river, but it would be in their minds always. Indeed, they must expect to follow its erratic course over plains and through valleys, heading into the northwest continually, until in due time they might hope to overtake those who had gone before, with horses, and boats, and all manner of stores, intended to placate, it might be, the hostile and suspicious tribes that had never before set eyes on a white man.

Yes, those were busy hours with every one. Even Sam felt that he must do what little he could. The hunting could wait until after his brother had said his last good-by, and ridden away into the west — time enough for all that; but just now he wanted to see all he could of Dick, who had never seemed half so dear as when he was about to go away.

Sad hours they were for the parents of both lads, though they endeavored to conceal it. The mothers shed their tears in secret, not wishing to display any weakness. Now that the matter had been settled they were like the staunch Roman mothers of old, who could with

dry eyes send their sons forth to battle, keeping all display of womanly weakness for their own rooms.

The horses that were to be taken had been selected, and every detail of saddles and bridles looked after before the first full day had gone. Bob and Sandy Armstrong saw to these things themselves. Their former experience in the forest was of great value in this emergency, for they knew just what ought to be taken by their sons, from extra flints in order to ensure fire, and for the rifles, to blankets needed on the nights when perhaps they would be exposed to chilling winds and storms, far up in a mountainous country.

By the time the next day was over, the preparations had gone on so well that the boys had gained the consent of their parents to making the start at noon of the following day, which would give them several hours' gain on the original plan of campaign.

Charts or plans of the country there were none, for no whites had penetrated more than a hundred miles or so to the westward. It was believed that many different tribes of Indians lived along the upper Missouri, for from time to time venturesome trappers had met roving

bands and picked up a certain amount of information concerning the fierce Sioux, the Blackfeet, the Mandans, and other nations that warred against each other, and seemed to hold certain sections of the country as their hunting grounds, ready to fight any trespassers, be they red or white.

Roger had gone down to the settlement of St. Louis to carry out some errand entrusted to him, and on his return it was seen that the boy looked very much excited, as though he might have heard news that concerned the mission he and his cousin had agreed to carry out.

The others were gathered at the cabin of Grandfather Armstrong, examining something which the old man had brought out, and which he wished the boys to take along with them on their trip.

So Roger came hurrying up, and his excited manner immediately drew the attention of everybody. The first thing that struck Bob Armstrong was that bad news might have been received concerning the expedition of Captain Lewis; for there had been many dismal prophecies uttered that they would fall before an overwhelming attack of hostile Indians before they had been a month on the way, or

reached anywhere near the falls of the river at the place where Atchison, Kansas, now stands.

"Tell us the worst, son!" demanded Sandy, as Roger reached the group. "Is it any evil that has befallen our good friend, Captain Lewis, and his gallant command?"

"No, not that, father," replied the boy; "but, would you believe it? that Frenchman, François Lascelles, has been in St. Louis with his son; and, learning of our mission, they have already started, bent on finding Williams before we can, and fixing it so that all our work will be useless!"

CHAPTER VII

OFF ON THE GREAT JOURNEY

"THE hound!" exclaimed Sandy Armstrong, with something of his old impetuosity.

"But, even as it is, we will outwit him," Dick observed, with that quiet resolution that was so distinctly a part of his character. "They can only have a day or so the start of us; and it may not be so hard to get ahead of his party in the thick of the woods."

"And if he tries any of his tricks on us," broke in the indignant Roger, "be sure that we will not spare him. We are going to remember that he is a bad man, who plans to rob us of our homes, and steal the property our parents have built up here. Yes, it won't be such a fine day for Monsieur Lascelles when he meets the Armstrong boys face to face; eh, Dick?"

The bad news Roger had brought from the settlement seemed to cast a shadow on the coming separation of the boys from those they

loved. The mothers sighed, and had hard work to force a smile when either of the lads happened to be near. Even the fathers got together many times, and conferred as to whether one of them should not accompany the boys.

But it seemed as though fate had stepped in to prevent. Sandy had recently been ill, and had hardly recovered his strength; while Bob, only a week before, had cut himself in the foot with an axe, so that he would be hobbling around for a month yet. And, under such conditions, either one of them would prove a drag on the movements of the boys.

And so it was finally decided that the original plan must be adhered to, unless they intended to change their minds entirely, and not allow Dick and Roger to undertake the mission.

The news had the effect of sobering Roger somewhat. He began to realize more than ever that their venture was to be no jaunt, but a serious matter, to call for the best efforts they could put forth. Not only would they be exposed to perils from wild animals, storms that must sweep over the great mountains from time to time, and constantly beset by the hostile Indians whose territory they meant to invade;

but here was a new danger in the vindictive and lawless French trader, who would leave no stone unturned to balk the accomplishment of their mission.

Still, neither dreamed of turning back. They were like old Israel Putnam — once his hand was at the plow, nothing could swerve him.

Their friends in the St. Louis settlement proved most kind. Many came out to talk matters over, and some to offer good advice concerning the many difficulties they had heard of in connection with the trail leading to the setting sun. And one and all brought something from their stores that they hoped the boys might find room for among the packages to be fastened on the packhorse.

It had been decided to take only one extra horse along. Dick had been instrumental in bringing about this decision. Although he advanced other reasons, the truth of the matter was that he expected they would have to abandon any pack animal when dangers began to thicken around them, and he did not want to be the means of causing greater loss than was necessary.

Besides, they could carry all they wanted on

one animal. There was a rude tent that had seen much use, cooking utensils, blankets, some extra clothing, stores intended for food, and some trinkets that Grandfather Armstrong supplied, such as beads and small looking-glasses, which his experience told him might be used to gain the good will of strange tribes of Indians, to whom such trifles would appeal strongly.

They could not have carried one-quarter of the many articles that well-meaning women friends of their mothers brought with them. This was no junketing expedition, on which they could start with a vast amount of preserves and cakes and such dainties; but a most serious business. They did not disdain to take some of the pemmican, because that might come in handy should they be passing through a dangerous section of country, where it would be risky to discharge a gun, lest by so doing the sound bring a host of enemies upon them.

Dick had listened to all the stories he could concerning the wilderness far up the great river. Then he had gone off by himself, and tried to draw an imaginary chart that would cover the ground. Upon this he had marked

all known points; and around any of which there existed any doubt he always drew a circle, to indicate that proof was needed.

No doubt this chart was a crude affair, and, if seen nowadays, when every mile of the distance has been measured and mapped by geographers, it would cause a smile; but, in the absence of anything definite, it gave the boys a certain amount of confidence; and, moreover, as they went along, and certain features were proved to be grossly exaggerated, they could make changes.

And if they were fortunate enough to come back again, what pride they could take in exhibiting that altered chart, which had been built up week after week, as they pierced farther and farther into the wilderness.

The eventful day dawned bright and clear.

It seemed a friendly omen to Dick Armstrong as he went about his morning duties as though nothing out of the ordinary was about to take place, so well under control did the boy hold himself.

They gathered in the big cabin of Grandfather Armstrong for dinner, every soul of the little settlement, and at the table the old man asked that the blessings of Heaven might fol-

low those two bold lads as they started out upon their adventure.

It would have been a cheerless meal indeed, had not Dick taken things in hand, and joked in a way quite unlike his usual self. But his father and uncle understood how full the lad's heart was, and that he was forced to assume such levity in order not to break down.

Finally the meal ended, but to most of those who took part it was more like a funeral feast than a banquet in spite of the good things with which Grandmother Armstrong and Aunt Kate had prepared.

And now the time had come to say good-by.

The horses were ready, fresh, and apparently eager to be moving, unconscious of the fact that in all probability they would never more see the home stable.

Despite their efforts to appear gay, the hearts of the boys seemed to be in their throats, so that in the end, when it came each lad's turn to embrace his mother a second time, turning to her last of all, neither Dick nor Roger could utter a single word.

But boyish nature is apt to soon recover from these things; and once they had shut out the familiar scene, and turned their faces

toward the west, they gradually recovered their customary spirits.

At the edge of the woods they stopped their horses, and turned in the saddle to wave a farewell. Across the field there welled the hearty calls of fathers and grandfather; while the shrill voice of Sam bade them not to forget that they had promised to fetch him back some memento of the country on the upper reaches of the Missouri, which some day, if he lived to be a man, he meant to visit for himself.

"Ready, Roger?" asked Dick, in a husky tone; for he knew that the sooner his impulsive cousin were started, so that the trees might shut out all view of those loved faces, the better.

"Yes, come on, Dick!" answered the other, gulping hard.

A word to the horses, and they were off. The heavy woods immediately came between, and, even though they turned in the saddle again, nothing of their home could they see.

The boys rode at a fast pace, because it seemed to agree with their spirits, just then, and they felt that they wanted to place some distance between themselves and home, possibly lest their resolution fail them.



"AT THE EDGE OF THE WOODS THEY STOPPED THEIR HORSES, AND TURNED IN THE SADDLE TO WAVE A FAREWELL."

And in thus making their start upon such a tremendous undertaking, what strange pictures must have occupied the minds of the adventurous pair, as they surveyed that uncertain future, which might be peopled with such adventures as mortals had never before dreamed of meeting?

But, just as Dick had foreseen would be the case, in half an hour both had seemingly recovered their spirits and were looking hopefully to the future to fulfill some of the many dreams that had filled their minds ever since the subject of the long journey had been broached.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRACK OF THE MARKED HOOF

"WHAT'S gone wrong, Roger?"

"Our packhorse has disappeared in the night; I've looked high and low for him, Dick, but it's no use."

"Did you hobble him the way we had the other animals fixed?" asked the other lad.

"Yes, but you know he always had a habit of straying farther than either of the riding horses; and the chances are he's gone so far now that he doesn't know the way back. What will we do about it, Dick; wait over and spend the best part of a day looking for him; or divide up the stuff, and get on?"

Impatient Roger undoubtedly would be for the latter method of solving the question, if left to his own devices. He was already tired of the slow progress they seemed to have been making in all these weeks they had been on the go.

"Well, in the first place," began Dick, "we ought to make some sort of a hunt for the pack-

horse. We've managed to keep him with us so far, after some narrow shaves, and it would be a great pity to let him go just because we didn't want to take the trouble to look him up."

"But," objected the other, "he may be miles away from here by now."

"Very well, Roger; if we find that such is the case we can give the hunt up, and do the next best thing. But let's start out, and see where his tracks lead."

"But how are we to know which are the tracks of the led animal, Dick?" queried Roger. "Horses' hoofs are pretty much the same, seems to me."

"Well, yes, as a rule that is so," came the reply, with a confident smile; "but in this case it happens that old Peter had a chip knocked from the outside edge of his off hind hoof, which always left a mark I could tell. I've noticed it about a hundred times, and always thought that, if the old stray ever did get away from us, with the stuff on his back, we could easily follow his trail."

"It takes you to notice all those things, Dick; and yet I have a good pair of eyes, too," observed Roger, thoughtfully.

"As good as mine, and perhaps better,

Roger; but the trouble is you seldom use them as much as you might. But come, let us start out and see what there is to be found. And look for the track with the outer edge sheared off."

The two boys had been in camp in a little depression on the bank of the river, which they had reached on the preceding afternoon.

At the time, the day had not been so far advanced but that they could have gone a few miles farther; but as soon as Dick had seen this camping place he had surprised and partly dismayed the eager Roger by expressing a desire to put in the night there.

The reason for this became manifest later on, when he showed his companion unmistakable signs to prove that the expedition they were following had, in fact, tied up there for the night. There were numerous indications to prove this — tracks of white men's shoes, and the moccasins of the guides and trappers accompanying the soldiers; as well as the hoof prints of the horses.

Of course, when he learned this fact Roger was reconciled to wasting a little of their precious time. He knew that they could discover a variety of things while camping in the

same place that those who preceded them had occupied.

And, after a careful examination of the signs, with a remembrance of the fact that quite a heavy rain had fallen two weeks before, which would have washed away any tracks made before its coming, both boys were convinced that the expedition must have camped here after that storm.

This was most important to the boys. It assured them that they had gained remarkably on Captain Lewis and his company, who had had such a long start of them. If the expedition had been here within two weeks, their chances of overtaking it were excellent. Perhaps in another week, or two at least, they might expect to come upon the boats.

That anticipation had made Roger unusually cheerful all through the preceding night. Indeed, he even found difficulty in sleeping, and had been on his feet numerous times after they lay down in their blankets under the shelter of the tent.

And now a new source of trouble had come upon them. Old Peter, the packhorse, had a habit of wandering off; and on several other occasions Roger had been compelled to hunt for

him in the morning; but this time he seemed to have disappeared for good.

Of course both lads took their rifles with them when leaving camp. In those early days, when one's life often depended on prompt action, and also on having the means of defence handy, men and boys never neglected to keep their firearms where they could lay a hand on them at a second's warning. Even when they slept, Dick and his cousin kept their guns close by, with a protecting arm generally thrown over them, for they looked upon these weapons as their best, indeed only, friends in this wild country.

It took Dick but a minute or two to circle around just outside the camp, and find the track of the broken hoof. Just as he expected, it soon began to edge away from camp. Old Peter was evidently up to his tricks again, and the grass must have seemed sweeter to him the further he could roam away from the spot where the tent had been pitched.

They followed the trail for a few minutes. Then Dick came to a pause, and, screening his eyes with his hand, looked keenly around.

"See any sign of the old rascal?" asked Roger.

"I must say I don't," came the answer; "and, to tell the truth, I hardly like the idea of wandering so far away from camp. While we are gone some one might come along and steal everything we own — horses, outfit and all."

"That would be a tough deal for us, Dick," remarked the other; "and for one I don't think it would pay us to take the chance for the sake of such an old horse as Peter. But what shall we do?"

"Go back and get our breakfast," answered Dick, promptly, as though he had been making up his mind while they hunted for the tracks; "then, if he doesn't show up, we can load the stuff on both our horses, and start out."

"But that would be a pretty uncomfortable way of doing, I'd say," objected Roger, who did not like the thought of riding perched on top of the folded tent, and with all manner of other things around him.

"Oh! I don't mean to try it long," the other hastened to reply. "You see, it happens that the trail leads up-river, so we could keep on following it, and not leave our stuff unprotected. Then, if we found Peter, it would be all right; and, on the other hand, if we didn't, and

had to give him up, I've a notion we'd better get rid of a few things like the tent, and go on our journey lighter."

"It *is* pretty old, for a fact, and clumsy, too. When that Indian brave sold the tent to us, he played a smart trick, for the skins had been exposed so long to sun and rain and wind that they were getting weak. I won't be sorry to see the old affair kicked out. We're used to sleeping on the ground, and if it rains we can make a shelter out of branches, or find a hole in the rocks."

"Perhaps a hollow tree," added Dick, laughingly, as they turned back toward camp.

"Oh, well, in that case we'll try to make sure it doesn't happen to be the den of a bear," observed the other. "Every time I think of that fellow about to drop down on us, it gives me the shivers."

On reaching the camp they hurried preparations for breakfast. It was always a simple meal, consisting of some meat or fish, cooked over the small fire they had burning, and a dish of tea, of which both boys happened to be very fond. Coffee in those early days was almost an unknown luxury among the Western pioneers along the Missouri.

When they had partaken of this frugal but satisfying meal, the boys started to take down the skin tent which had been the subject of Roger's remarks. It was an old Indian lodge, and, while the figures of animals and hunting scenes that once decorated its sides were pretty well faded, enough remained to interest the boys from time to time, and cause more or less speculation as to what they were intended to represent.

After they had managed to load all their possessions on the backs of the two riding horses, much to the surprise of the animals, they said good-by to their night's camp, and once more started off, heading into the northwest, and following the river.

Thus far much of their journey had been over the level plains, although from time to time they had been in the country of hills and forests, as well as rocky sections.

It happened that they were just then in a region where the woods came down to the banks of the river; and in the open places grew the grass upon which the hobbled horses had fed during the night.

Neither of the boys thought to climb into their saddles while following the marked trail

of the missing packhorse; indeed, that would have been next door to an impossibility, with all those traps piled high on the animals' backs. They walked along ahead of the horses, keeping their eyes for the most part on the trail.

"The old sinner, to think that he'd wander all this way from where the others put in the night," Roger remarked, when they had kept on for almost ten minutes.

"Still, he doesn't show up ahead, as far as I can see," Dick observed, "and, if we fail to sight him soon, we'll have to say good-by to Peter, because he's beginning to bear away from the river, and we don't want to spend a whole day looking for a poor old packhorse which we'd soon lose, I reckon, anyway, when we get in the region of the hostile Indians."

He had hardly said this when he threw up his hand.

"Stop a minute, Roger," said Dick, bending down, as though he had made a discovery that aroused his deepest interest.

"What have you found — did Peter break his hobble rope? For I notice you have picked up a piece of it, Dick."

"Look closer, and you will see that it has been cut by something sharp, which I should

say must have been a knife,'' the other went on, hurriedly, yet with conviction in his voice; '' and, Roger, we might as well make up our minds that Peter is gone for good, because here are the imprints of moccasins in the soft earth; an Indian must have run across our packhorse, and carried him off! ''

CHAPTER IX

ALONG THE BANK OF THE MISSOURI

"WHAT a shame!" exclaimed Roger, as soon as he could speak.

"Oh! well, it might have been a lot worse," remarked Dick.

"You mean that we didn't care very much for old Peter, after all; is that it, Dick?" demanded the other.

"Yes; and, besides, just think what a mess we would have been in if it had been a party of Indian thieves, and they'd made a clean sweep of *all* our horses," was the way Dick consoled himself.

Of course his cousin quickly saw things in the same light, as he generally did after Dick had explained his views.

"How lucky," he went on, "that we were smart enough to build our little cooking fire last night in that hollow, so it couldn't have been seen a hundred feet away. Only for that this same horse thief must have found out

where we had our camp, and tried for the balance of our horses."

"Well, how can we blame him for picking up a stray animal that seemed to be wandering around without an owner?" asked Dick. "I heard an old trapper and trader tell Captain Lewis one day, when I was hanging around the camp near the settlement, that he would always have lots of trouble keeping his horses; for that was one thing the Indians coveted. After this, we must not let our two animals wander away."

"I should say not," Roger returned, vigorously. "Why, it wouldn't take an Indian ten seconds to throw a leg over one of our fine horses, and be off like a flash. What would be the use of firing after him, when we'd be just as apt to hit the running animal? No, we'll simply have to be careful — more than ever, now. To lose a horse would ruin our chances for overtaking the expedition, wouldn't it, Dick?"

"I'm afraid it would," replied the other, as he started to take off the huge packages with which each of their animals had been burdened.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Roger.

"The first thing is to look over all this stuff, and see what we can do without."

As he said this Dick cast aside the Indian tent that made quite a good-sized package of itself, even when carefully folded.

Roger gave it a rueful glance, for he had thought more than a little of that old affair. Then he laughed in his quick, nervous way, and on his own account began to toss things from the back of the other horse.

Whenever he came to something concerning which he seemed to be in doubt, Roger would hold it up, and say:

"What about this, Dick; think we really need it?"

In several cases his cousin was able to decide without any consideration, for the boys had thrust in a number of things that, so far, they had found no need for, and probably might not use at all. Some of these had associations that they hated to break; but it seemed absolutely necessary to reduce the stock they carried. And so Dick would grimly nod his head, and say:

"Throw it aside, Roger; no use talking, it's got to go. Our horses couldn't undertake to carry us and all this stuff, too. But I tell you

what we might do with it, and take a chance of getting it back some time."

"You must mean *cache* it, like the trappers do some of their pelts, when they have more than they can carry, and mean to come back after the rest at some future time; is that it, Dick?"

"Just what I meant," the other replied. "You see, we can do up the lot inside this old tent, and find a hollow tree to hide it in."

"Close by the river, you mean, of course," added Roger, eagerly; for anything like this always appealed to him.

"Yes, so that, when we come down again, we can look for the mark we'll remember, and which may be a crooked tree bending over the water, or something like that. Then we could come ashore to get the package, if we're drifting in a boat, as may be the case. Captain Lewis might want to buy our horses, you know, if he has lost a number of his animals through wild beasts, and thieving Indians."

"But let's be sure the hole in the tree is a *small* one," observed Roger, turning a laughing face on his cousin.

"We will, you can be sure of that," the other assured him; "because, they tell me that

bears are apt to make their dens in some of these hollow trees; and we don't want our traps to be used for a bed quilt."

So they sorted all the stuff over; and it was wonderful how little they deemed indispensable. Friends had brought so many things as presents for the adventurous boys, when they learned of the long journey which they projected, that there were numerous duplicates in their outfit, such as frying-pans, kettles and even blankets.

Finally the task was completed, and the tight bundle tied with cords, so that it could be stowed away in some secret hiding-place, when they discovered one that seemed to suit their ideas.

After that the forward march was resumed, though they made certain to keep close to the bank of the river.

Before they left the spot Roger was seen to once more bend over that imprint of a moccasin, as though examining it.

"What new idea has struck you?" asked his cousin, watching him closely.

"You may say it is foolish," replied the other, "but, do you know, Dick, I was wondering whether this might not have been either

François Lascelles, or his son, who had stolen our horse, thinking to cripple us, and in that way keep us from overtaking the expedition of Captain Lewis.''

The suggestion caused Dick to knit his brows, but he quickly shook his head.

'' In the first place, while I've never met this French trader, still, I've heard so much about him that I feel sure he would never have rested content until he had found our camp, so that he could steal all our horses. No, Roger, this was only a wandering Indian, who happened to run across old Peter, and gobbled him up. Look more closely at the footprint, and you will see that it toes in very much. All Indians walk that way, you know. Yes, some white men do, I admit, but the wearing of moccasins never makes them turn their toes in as Indians do. This was a copper-colored fellow, I'd be willing to stake my reputation on that.''

'' Oh, well,'' remarked the other, giving up, as he usually did after arguing for a short time with Dick, '' it doesn't matter much, anyway. The packhorse is gone, and we'll never see him again. Shall we start on, now, Dick? ''

'' We might as well,'' replied the leader of

the little party, as he climbed into his seat with some difficulty on account of the other burdens loaded on the horse, " and remember that we must keep our eyes on the lookout for some place to hide that package."

Roger had insisted on loading the " cast-offs " on his horse, while he walked. It was not going to be for long, he asserted, and he could stand it; and so the other had let him have his way, because he knew that Roger was always happy when he could be doing something for others.

They were not long in discovering the very hiding-place they wanted in which to conceal the tent and other things. And, as usual, it was Roger's keen eyes that caught sight of it.

" Look over there, Dick. How would that suit us? — that tree with the hump on its trunk, I mean; see the hole just above the ground, which, I take it, is large enough to hold all we want to put in it. Then we can stuff stones in afterwards, and block any animal from spreading himself on our property."

" Yes, and after that we must efface all signs of what we've been doing," declared Dick; " because some Indian might happen to cross

our trail and take a notion to follow it a space. When he came up to this place he'd notice that we had done something to that tree, and take a look in. But then, we ought to know how to do that, or else we're mighty poor hunters."

They had little difficulty in pushing the bundle into the hollow, and then filling the balance of the cavity with stones; finally removing all traces of the fact that any human being had been close to the marked tree.

After that they found a peculiar tree growing on the river bank, which both noted carefully, so that they believed they would have little or no trouble in recognizing it again, should the chance ever come to them, when returning home. For at that time neither Dick nor Roger dreamed how far afield they were fated to roam before once more seeing the dear ones they had left behind. It was their avowed intention to overtake the expedition, find Jasper Williams, get his signature, duly witnessed, upon the paper; and then start back down the river as fast as horses or current could take them. The young pioneers did not suspect how they would be tempted by circumstances, and possibly continue in the company of those gallant captains, Lewis and

Clark, to the end of their long journey toward the distant Pacific.

Once more they were able to move along with something approaching speed, where the buffalo trails through the forest followed the river, as often happened. These animals did not confine themselves to the vast plains altogether, though they were to be found there in great herds; pairs of them, often with young, sometimes frequented woody spots, as though they sought them to be free from the companionship of their kind.

Several times, now, the boys had seen these great animals crashing through the brush to one side. They had not attempted to shoot one, because it was thought best, while in the country of hostile Indians, not to fire their guns if it could be avoided, lest the unusual sound bring trouble upon their heads. At this time the redmen west of the Mississippi had none of the "sticks that spit out fire, and sting," their weapons being chiefly bows and arrows, spears, and war clubs; though most of them carried rude knives, and tomahawks made out of either stone, copper or some flint-like wood.

Among the things which Roger had insisted

on retaining, there happened to be an Indian bow and arrows, which he had traded for a year and more back. By dint of much practice Roger had become quite expert in the use of this stout bow, and could send his feathered shafts with considerable accuracy. At home he had brought down more or less game with his arrows, including a savage hawk that had seized a young chicken, and flown to a tree to devour its prey.

Roger had insisted on fetching this outfit along. He had ventured the prediction that it would come in very handy, some time or other, when they wanted to secure a stock of fresh meat, and disliked using their rifles.

During the balance of the morning they continued to follow the river pretty closely, though at times they had to turn their backs on it, since the buffalo trail they chanced to be following at the time left the vicinity of the Missouri. Both boys were willing to be guided by the instinct of these animals, knowing that in all probability there must be some swampy section of ground ahead, which was thus avoided.

At about noon they halted, and ate, though not going to the trouble of starting a fire;

though either of the boys could have made one out of wood so dry and well seasoned that the smoke would not have been seen at any distance away, such had been their forest training.

Then once more they were on the go. The fact that the expedition had passed here only a week or ten days ahead had given them considerable satisfaction, for it told that they were rapidly overtaking those whom they wanted to join.

It had been their intention to keep moving until nearly dusk, when they expected to look for a suitable camping-place and settle down for what they hoped would be a peaceful night.

The sun was quite low in the western heavens when Dick, who happened to be in the advance, drew in his horse, and made a movement with his arm that brought the other to a full stop. Both boys slipped from their saddles, and came together, Roger with alarm written upon his face, until he saw that his companion, while excited, looked rather pleased.

"Then it isn't Indians?" whispered Roger, laying a hand on the other's arm.

"No," came the low reply; "but I just happened to glimpse a little band of elk, feed-

ing in an open glade. And as we haven't had any fresh meat for three days the idea struck me, Roger, that perhaps this is the chance for you to make use of your Indian bow and arrows!"

CHAPTER X

THE TWANG OF A BOWSTRING

"I'd like to do that first-rate," Roger replied, at the same time passing hastily over to his horse, in order to get the bow, with his quiver of arrows.

"It just happens, luckily," Dick whispered, having fastened his horse to a tree, "that the wind is in our favor, because we're to leeward of the elk, and they will not get scent of you creeping up."

"How about cover?" asked Roger, as, with a hand that trembled a little in spite of his efforts to appear calm, he commenced to bend the stout hickory bow on his knee, and slip the loop of cord over the notched end.

"You'll have to pick your own as you find it," came the reply. "I didn't have a chance to see what it was like; but there ought to be some way to creep close up, so as to get in a shot. I only hope you manage to put an

arrow where it will count. Some elk steaks would taste pretty fine, let me tell you, Roger."

"I'll do my level best," was the reply of the archer, as, having arranged the otterskin quiver over his left shoulder, so that he could quickly pull out a second feathered shaft, should it be needed in a hurry, he fitted the one he had retained to the bowstring, and then prepared to advance toward the spot where Dick had noted the feeding elk.

"Easy, now, Roger," for Dick knew the other's failings, and many a time had his admonition stilled a tumult in the heart of the nervous lad, causing him to get a grip on himself, and come out of some enterprise with credit.

Roger was a born hunter, at least. Few border lads could creep up on a suspicious quarry more quietly than he. Part of this was an inherited trait; but he had also been much in the company of a young Indian brave who used to visit at the St. Louis settlement before his people went further West; and from him Roger had picked up many valuable points.

He now bent down, and glided noiselessly

along until he could see through an opening in the underbrush, when he, too, caught sight of the elk.

The sight thrilled the young hunter, and caused him to shut his teeth hard together as he resolved to do his very best to get in a fatal shot. The fact that he knew his cousin would surely be watching him seemed to lend Roger additional faculties; and when he finally dropped down, and commenced to do his creeping, he was in a mood to excel all previous efforts.

Once in a while, as he "snaked" his way from bush to bush, taking advantage of every possible screen, the lad would lift his head just a little to take an observation. And thus he learned that there were three elk in the band, as far as he could see just then, although others might be lying down where they were hidden from observation.

First there was the buck, a big fellow with a pair of towering antlers that looked particularly dangerous; then there was a cow; and finally a half-grown calf.

It was upon this last that Roger had fastened a covetous eye, for he knew that the meat of both the older animals would very

likely prove pretty tough eating, and just then he was after a supply of food, rather than a skin from which to make moccasins, or a new fringed borderman's jacket.

As his cousin had said, the wind was just where he most wanted it, blowing directly from the feeding animals toward the place where he was edging his way along, foot by foot, careful not to make the least movement that the elk might notice and take the alarm.

Keeping a close watch upon them now, Roger tried to suit his movements to their own; that is, he waited until the three had their heads down while cropping the sweet grass that grew in the glade. At such a time he crept a little closer.

These golden opportunities did not come as frequently as he wished, for it seemed to him as though the elk had some arrangement whereby they took turn-about in keeping a suspicious eye around, one doing this duty while the other two fed. Still, now and then a chance came, of which he was always quick to make use.

Ten, fifteen minutes had passed, and by that time he felt that he was in a position to make

a fair shot if it became necessary to do so in a hurry. He figured on trying his skill, even should the elk suddenly take the alarm, and start to run away. Roger had practised long and devotedly at moving targets, and delighted in being able to hit a running animal, just as an Indian, born to the bow, might have done.

Still, he felt that he would like to get a little nearer to the youngster before trying to get in his work. Fresh meat meant a good deal to them just then, since it would fill a long-felt want, and at the same time help to preserve their priceless ammunition. And under these conditions the boy was bound to make as sure of his aim as possible.

With most species of ordinary antelope and deer the young is called a fawn; but even in those days, with so large an animal as an elk, a moose, or a buffalo, it was known as a calf; and so the boys had learned to term it.

Peering out from behind the clump of bushes that served him as his last screen, Roger saw just one more good hiding-place close at hand, if only the chance arose whereby he could reach it.

He did not want to lie flat on his face from

now on, and wriggle along like a crawling snake; because while in that position he would not be able to shoot quickly, should the elk take the alarm.

So he meant to wait again until all three of the animals seemed to be engaged in feeding, when he would creep stealthily forward. He could keep his eye fastened on the elk, and if one of them started to raise its head Roger would instantly become as rigid as a stump; and possibly, if the animal noticed him at all, it would take his motionless figure for some such harmless thing.

But fortune was very kind to the young hunter. He managed to gain the new covert without having to halt once; which he considered a lucky thing indeed. And it can be set down as certain that, having held his breath pretty much all the time he was making this critical change of base, Roger heaved a great sigh of relief when he found he had succeeded in his undertaking, and that, so far as he could see, the usually timid elk had not shown the least sign of alarm.

Now would come the test of skill, when he was to gradually raise himself until on his knees, and, taking sure aim, send his keen-

pointed arrow straight at the flank of the youngster, fortunately nearer to him than either of the others.

Roger tried to still his rapidly beating heart. Strange how excited he always grew at a time when he needed all the coolness he could summon. Had it been Dick, the chances were that he would be perfectly self-possessed under similar circumstances, and able to do his level best; whereas a fellow who finds himself trembling as with the "buck ague" is placed under a handicap. And yet Roger had brought many a fine deer low with his trusty gun, during all the time that he had ranged the woods and open country in search of game for the family at home.

Having in some measure managed to get control over his nerves, he now prepared to carry out his plans.

First of all it was necessary that the elk be feeding at the same moment, and it seemed to the impatient Roger that one of them was on the lookout all of the time.

But in the end his chance did come; perhaps in less time than he imagined, for Roger was apt to count seconds as minutes when laboring under such a strain.

No sooner had the big buck lowered his head than gradually the form of the hunter arose from the midst of the clump of grass. The sturdy bow was extended, clutched in a hand that no longer trembled, but was as firm as a rock; the other started to draw back the arrow, the notched end of which was fitted on the taut cord.

Roger could have asked for no better chance than the one now presented to him, for by the greatest of good luck the side of the calf was toward him, and its left foreleg advanced, giving him a splendid opening to speed his arrow straight at a vital point behind that same shoulder.

So Roger let fly. The hurtling shaft shot through the sunlight like a thing of life, the eagle feathers with which it was plumed simply showing to a practised eye the direction in which it sped.

There was heard a slight thud as the arrow struck. The calf was seen to start violently, while both the buck and the doe looked up, and jumped several feet.

Then all three started to run off, though it was instantly seen by the young hunter that the calf faltered, and grew weak from the

effect of the death-dealing barb that had pierced its side.

Roger had instinctively thrown up his hand and drawn another arrow from his quiver, which he was even then adjusting to his bow-string. He had several reasons for doing this. In the first place his hunter instinct advised him that it was always best to be on the safe side; for there could be no telling but what that savage old buck would get over his fright, and turn to offer battle to the enemy. And in that open place, with not even a friendly tree to offer him refuge from those ugly antlers, Roger had no heart for the job of meeting an enraged beast, capable of doing him serious damage before Dick could come to the rescue with his rifle.

But the young elk had evidently received a fatal wound, for it ran only a dozen yards, when it began to stagger.

Just then, as Roger, having fitted his second arrow, was in the act of taking a swift aim, so as to be ready to make assurance doubly certain, to his astonishment he heard a peculiar twang that sounded like the snap of a bow-string.

And, as he arose to his feet to start forward

after the wounded animal, just falling to the ground, he believed that he saw a second arrow sticking from its side.

The first instinct of the hunter is to make sure of his quarry; and so Roger hastened to run forward. He kept a wary eye on the other elk, however, to see that the possessor of those tremendous antlers did not turn back, with the idea of giving battle to the strange enemy on two legs, so different from the four-footed wolves and panthers which he had known in the past.

But somehow this did not come to pass. Either the buck failed to grasp the full nature of the disaster that had befallen his little family; or else, catching a whiff of human foes about that time, fear had dominated valor. At any rate he sped out of sight, with the frightened doe ahead of him — at least the buck was gallant enough to hang back, and protect the rear.

Roger went as fast as he could toward the fallen calf, pleased to know that he had been so successful in his little hunt, and that they would have fresh meat for some time to come.

As he ran he seemed to understand, as though through instinct, that there was some

one else pushing ahead on one side of him; but, being in such desperate haste to plant a foot on the fallen game first, he could not even take the time to look.

He heard a distant whoop from Dick, which, however, fell on deaf ears if it was intended as a warning. Roger was an obstinate boy, and, having taken a notion to accomplish a certain thing, he could not be easily discouraged or influenced to give up his design.

There the young elk lay, and in plain sight, so that, rushing up, Roger had no difficulty in placing his right foot on the still quivering body, by that act making it known to whoever disputed his claim that he intended to stand by his rights.

It happened that the animal had fallen so that its wounded side lay uppermost, and one of the first things the young hunter noticed was the fact that there were *two* arrows deeply imbedded there; his own well-known eagle-feathered shaft, and one that had the token of the gray goose fastened to its end in a peculiar circling manner, calculated to influence its steadiness of flight.

Then, casting his eyes up, Roger saw the figure of his rival — apparently an Indian,

though dressed in tanned buckskin after the manner of white hunters, and gripping a bow in his left hand.

The other was staring hard at the boy, as though astounded to find himself face to face with a young paleface, never before known in this particular section.

And there they stood, each with a foot advanced, and a look of defiance on their faces, as though ready to dispute title to the possession of the dead elk.

CHAPTER XI

"ALL, OR NONE!"

"GAME mine!"

When the dark-faced man in the fringed buckskin said these two words in an angry tone, Roger felt something of a shock. He looked closer, and realized that possibly the other hunter might *not* be an Indian after all, but one of those half-breeds who sometimes made their homes with the tribes, and again sought the company of the whites, either English or French.

"Oh! is that so?" the boy answered back, in a satirical tone; "well, just prove it to me then, and I'll throw up my claim."

He kept his arrow fitted to the bowstring all the time, and aimed directly toward the breast of the other. Should the necessity have arisen he could have sped the shaft like lightning, even at such close range, for it only requires one quick movement of the arm to do this.

The man pointed to the arrow that was just back of the fallen elk's shoulder.

"Put there — in heart — bring game down every time!" he ejaculated, with the most refreshing impudence imaginable, that made the boy looked amazed, then furious, and finally laugh outright.

"Oh! is that your dodge, then?" he exclaimed. "You claim that as your arrow, do you? Well, suppose you show me another just like it. Every one of mine is tipped with eagle feathers, and made by the son of a chief; while yours are lined with the quills of a wild gray goose. That ought to be proof enough to settle the matter."

"My elk!" growled the other, with a glitter in his black eyes that boded ill for the boy, should he be caught off his guard.

But Roger knew well that his cousin must by now have unhitched both horses, and be hurrying up, intent on taking a hand in the affair, if necessary. Besides, he was in the habit of looking out for himself in such matters.

There is probably nothing that ever angered a borderer, young or old, more, than to have his right and title to certain game he had shot disputed by a rival claimant, when

the evidence was all in favor of the first hunter.

Many a fatal quarrel has been recorded in the history of the frontier through this very same thing, where two men have crept up on their quarry, unknown to each other, and fired at about the same time. Each always rested under the belief that his missile was the one that brought the game down; or, even if this were not so, that he could have sent in a second shot which would have accomplished the end he had in view.

But Roger was a fair and square sort of lad, also generous in the extreme.

He could realize how keenly disappointed any one must be at finding another just ahead when the final test came. It was his design to prove his claim to the young elk, so that none could dispute it; and then offer to divide.

"Listen to me," he said, trying to speak impressively. "We may have crept up on the game at the same time; but I chanced to shoot first. My arrow struck there, and entered the animal's heart. That was a fatal wound. The beast had almost come to a full stop, and was staggering, ready to drop, when I heard your bowstring twang. Besides, your arrow en-

tered in the body; and, as it was, without any other hurt, the elk would have run far before dropping. You know that as well as I do. And so it is my game."

"Ugh! better not try keep elk!" grunted the other, while his fingers were seen to twitch as he gripped his bow; but he had not taken time to fit another arrow after letting loose, and so the white boy had a decided advantage over him, which those restless black eyes had not failed to note.

"Now, I'll tell you what I'd be willing to do, because I know how hard it is to go through all that work of creeping up, and then lose the game. I've proved that my arrow killed the elk; but I'm willing to go halves with you! How does that suit?"

When Roger said this he knew Dick was coming, and that, as he undoubtedly would be holding his rifle ready in his hands, he could make quick use of it should the necessity arise. So that it was certainly not fear that induced him to offer to hand over half of the game to the rival claimant.

But apparently the dark-faced man was not the kind to appreciate such generosity. With him it was a matter of all, or none. He knew

well that by rights he had no sort of claim to the game, but hoped to bully the boy into abandoning his just claims.

"My game!" he replied doggedly; "see first, and shoot before same fall. What business you have here in hunting land of Shoshones? If I tell chief, Running Antelope, he soon find, and have scalp hanging in wigwam!"

"Oh! I guess not," remarked Roger, thinking that it might be best to let this other, who must be friendly with the hostile Indians, believe that he and Dick were only the forerunners of a large party; "for my friends would come up in numbers, and burn the village of Running Antelope, if he so much as injured a hair on my head. But here is my hunter companion; let us see what he says."

When the half-breed turned his head, and saw what a well-armed fellow Dick was, as well as noted the look on his face, he drew back a step, as though realizing that his absurd claim on the quarry would never have a ghost of a show at making good. If one white boy could not be browbeaten, there was little chance that he could bully a pair of them.

"What's all this about, Roger?" asked

Dick, as he jumped from his horse, rifle in hand, and pressed the weapon of his cousin into the other's willing hands; for, after all, a gun felt much better than a bow, when there was need for action.

"Settle this matter, Dick," observed the young hunter, eagerly. "I shot first, and you can see my arrow sticking just back of the shoulder. It must have reached a vital place, for the beast was just staggering, ready to fall, when I heard his bowstring sound — and you can see where he struck. That elk would have run one or two miles with a hurt through the body like this; because we have seen deer do the same. Am I right, Dick?"

"Every word of it is the truth, Roger," replied the other, quietly, but at the same time positively.

"And," Roger went on, "you can see whose arrow it is that did the business, Dick; because mine are feathered with eagle plumes, while his all have the gray goose quills fastened on the shaft, circling it so as to give the arrow a whirling motion as it passes through the air."

"The proof is everything that any honest man would ask to back up your claim," Dick

continued; "but what were you offering to do when I came up? I heard him say that it was his game, and saw him shake his head as if he refused an offer."

"Why, I didn't want to be stingy about it, and offered to share and share alike with him," replied Roger. "That was fair enough, since the whole of the game belongs to me by the law of the woods."

"I should say it was," his cousin exclaimed, turning again to the half-breed, who stood there, moodily listening to this talk, and shooting black looks at the pair of white boys.

"And then he started to threaten me, saying that if he carried the news of our being here in the land of the fierce Shoshones to their big chief, Running Antelope, he would come with his braves, and make us prisoners, so that our hair would hang in the lodges of the Indians. That's a nice way to answer a fellow, Dick, when he makes an offer like that. It was just like a slap in the face."

"Just so, Roger; and for one I think you ought to take it back, after the way he answered you," Dick went on, frowning at the dark-faced man. "He says all or none, does he? Very good, let it be none, then. We can

use this young elk nicely, and you earned the prize. I never saw a better stalk in my life."

"And," remarked Roger, still meaning to impress the half-breed with the idea that they were only the skirmishers of a large party of whites that was advancing up the Missouri, "some of the rest of our friends would be glad of a chance to put their teeth into such tender juicy meat as this, eh, Dick?"

Of course Dick guessed instantly what object his cousin had in making such a queer remark, but he was too wise to say anything to the contrary. In fact he thought so well of the little scheme himself that he smiled, and nodded his head as he remarked:

"Well, I should think they would, Roger; anybody'd like a meal of such tender meat. And now, who may you be? I don't suppose your name is Lascelles, is it?" and he turned upon the half-breed as he asked this sudden question.

A flash of intelligence, when that name was mentioned, passed over the dark face of the other; but he shook his head in the negative.

"Not Lascelles. Know same though. Name Batiste Dupuy. Trapper, trader, voyageur from the North. Friend of Running

Antelope, and the Cheyennes. They give right to hunt, trap all through this country. Paleface boys no business shoot elk. My game! Must have all or none. Ugh!"

If his name was Batiste Dupuy, as he claimed, the half-breed must have lived a good part of his life among the redmen, for he had copied many of their ways. His knowledge of English seemed rather meagre, for he could hardly find suitable means whereby to express himself; for, while he spoke, he made many violent gestures, that were intended to add vigor to his few words.

"Then make up your mind you're going to have none," said Roger, now growing angry himself at the arrogance of the fellow. "If you want your arrow, here it is; but not an ounce of the elk meat do you get."

He jerked the shaft feathered with the quills of the gray goose from its lodging-place in the side of the dead elk, and handed it out toward the other. The man condescended to take it, but immediately broke it across his knee, as though by such violent means he expected them to understand that he intended to be their inveterate foe from that time forth.

"Go! Get out of this!" cried the impetu-

ous Roger, pointing with his quivering finger. "And just remember, Monsieur Dupuy, we have long rifles here, and know how to drive a nail at thirty paces; so that, if you try to do us any harm, it will be at your peril. That is all."

An Indian might have said, "I have spoken!" but Roger's way was just as expressive, accompanied as it was by that sweep of the hand.

The man's eyes narrowed until they seemed to be mere slits, as he glared at the bold young speaker. Then he flung his head in a disdainful gesture, and remarked with a sneer:

"Never before did Batiste Dupuy take orders from a cub. Huh! wait and see who laughs loudest. Mebbe Batiste, his hour will come soon. Lascelles, you said? — it may be I know same; and he much glad to hear of you! Sacre! that is all I say!"

With that he made them a mocking bow, showing that he surely had French blood in his veins, and, whirling on his moccasined heel, strode angrily away.

After going a certain distance he turned and looked toward them, as if measuring the intervening space. Roger even thought he could

see him fitting an arrow to his bowstring and at once half raised his rifle threateningly. If Batiste had intended trying a shot at them, he speedily abandoned his idea when he saw how ready they were to send their lead in his direction. He must have known that pioneer boys were quite at home with their long-barreled guns, and could snip off the swaying head of a wild turkey, buried in the earth to its neck, at the annual shoots where the best marksmen came together to compete.

At any rate, he contented himself with shaking his fist in their direction, and then moving away again.

"A good riddance to bad rubbish!" exclaimed Roger, though evidently pleased to see the last of the ruffian.

"And we'd better be getting away from here as soon as we can," remarked Dick, better able than his impulsive companion to understand what this chance encounter, and the making of an enemy, might mean for them.

"But he knows that François Lascelles, Dick; you heard him say so!" Roger remarked, as he started to fasten his horse, so that they could cut up the game as speedily as possible, and ride away, one of them mean-

while standing guard, so that the half-breed might not sneak up close enough to use his bow on them.

"Yes, I guessed that he might, for they belong to the same class," the other observed, thoughtfully. "Perhaps Lascelles has bought pelts from this rover, and they may be the best of friends. And, if he knows that the French trader is anywhere around here now, be sure he will try to get word to him as fast as he can, to tell about our coming. And from now on we will have to be on our guard every minute of the day and night, looking for an attack from either the Indians, or the party of the Frenchman. They did not seem to know just how many started out with Lascelles and his son, but it must have been several."

"And of the same stripe as himself," remarked Roger, starting to take the skin from the young elk with a skill that had been attained only through long practice. "Remember what our fathers said, Dick; day and night we must keep watch for the silent foe that would crawl up on us unseen, and catch us napping!"

CHAPTER XII

THE HIDDEN CAMP

There remained only an hour or so of daylight after Roger had secured the best parts of the carcass of the young elk, and fastened the bundle of fresh meat to his saddle.

Dick knew that they must be more than ordinarily careful where they spent the night, because the chances were the vindictive half-breed would be scouring the country looking for signs of them. If they were incautious about building the cooking fire, his sharp eyes would be sure to discover their location; and, should that occur, they could expect trouble.

The thing that worried them most of all was the possible theft of their mounts. That the packhorse had been stolen was not a matter of such importance, for they could get on without an additional animal; but in regard to their saddle horses the case was vastly different.

It would be next to impossible to overtake the expedition on foot, as they had learned be-

fore now. In following the river, there were times when, on account of bad ground, they had to cover five miles in order to make one of progress. And all this time the hardy voyageurs who were boatmen for Captain Lewis would be urging their craft forward with the skill and ability peculiar to their kind.

This being the case, Dick was bent on finding some hiding-place for a camp, where they could be additionally secure, and the horses kept within close reach.

"No fire to-night, unless we can hide it," he announced to his companion, when they were once more moving along, keeping a constant lookout for foes, and at the same time on the alert for the nook that would meet their requirements for a camp.

Roger groaned.

"Then I do hope we'll be lucky enough to find a good place," he remarked, as he redoubled his efforts to make the discovery; "because I'm hungry for a bite of this fine young elk. Why, it's been three days now, or even more, since I put a tooth in fresh meat. This tough old pemmican is as hard as flint, and next to tasteless."

"But you know what our mother would say,

Roger about looking a gift horse in the mouth. If we could get nothing better, this same dried venison would keep us alive; and when you're real hungry it doesn't seem so very bad."

"Oh, well, perhaps not, Dick," admitted the other; "and I've seen times when it tasted pretty good; but after being on that pemmican for three days, and with a young elk in hand, it would be hard if we couldn't have a fire to-night."

"Let's hope that the chance turns up, then," remarked Dick, cheerfully. "And about this same pemmican, you know that the Indians live pretty much all winter on it. Besides, when a brave is sent a hundred or two miles across country, to carry a message to the chief of another tribe, all he takes along with him is a little dried meat in his ditty bag, that he munches once in a while, drinking at the springs he runs across on the way. I believe an Indian runner could keep on from the Mississippi to the ocean just that way, carrying all he needed to eat in a package not larger than my head."

They kept pushing on, making as good time as the nature of the rough ground permitted;

while the sun dropped out of sight, and dusk began to gather around them.

Roger was really beginning to despair, and feared that they would have to pass a fireless night, one keeping constantly on guard while the other slept, so that the horses might be protected, when a sudden low exclamation from his companion thrilled him.

"What is it, Dick?" he asked, nervously fingering his gun, which he kept in his hand as he rode along; "did you see any one skulking in the shadows?"

"Oh! no, not that, Roger," replied his cousin, cheerfully; "but, unless I miss my guess, we've come to a fine place to make our camp; and, if things turn out as well as I expect, there ought to be a chance for a small fire, enough of a blaze to cook some of your meat by."

"Good! You make me feel happy again, Dick!" exclaimed the other, eagerly; "but show me where you've made this discovery."

"Look over in that direction, and you can see the rocks piled up," Dick went on. "It seems to me that we ought to find a hiding-place among them, where we can pitch our little camp. Of course it means that we must

come down, and pull all the grass the horses will need, and perhaps take them to water, too; but that is nothing to worry over, if only we pass the night without an attack."

It turned out as Dick predicted, for they did find a splendid nook in the midst of the rocks, where they could be safe from observation. And Roger soon discovered the very spot for the little fire.

Both the young pioneers were soon as busy as beavers, for there was much to be done. The horses had been watered before coming up among the rocks, so that would not have to be attended to again. Dick went down, and started to pull grass, which he carried in armfuls up to where the horses had been secured; and once the faithful beasts started to contentedly munch at their supper, there was no reason why they should give any more trouble.

Meanwhile Roger had started the fire. It was only an apology for one, and offered little cheer; but on this occasion the boys were not thinking of sitting around a blaze, toasting their feet, and watching the sparks fly upward, to "tell all creation of their presence," as Roger expressed it. All they wanted was sufficient heat to cook the meat and make a pot

of tea, after which the fire would be allowed to go out.

Roger knew how to cook better than most lads of his age, and Dick always let him have full swing when out on their numerous hunting trips. Considering the few appliances for comfort which hunters in those days carried with them, the boys got on splendidly. If there was no frying-pan handy they could thrust small portions of meat on the ends of long splinters of wood, and in this fashion manage to obtain what was to them a satisfying meal.

The tender elk meat pleased them both, and Roger was kept busy with "repeat orders" for some time. But finally they cared for no more; after which the red embers of the cooking fire were covered with earth, and the last sign of human presence obliterated, even the odor of supper passing away with the disappearance of the heat.

Later on, Roger lay down in his blanket and slept soundly, while Dick sat, gun in hand, and watched. Long did the hours seem, and many times no doubt some cry from a night bird would startle the sentry, always suspicious lest this might be a signal uttered by some creep-

ing Indian to tell his mates that he had made a discovery.

When the stars had given notice that the time for his vigil was at an end, Dick woke the other, and from that hour on to daybreak Roger sat silent, watchful, and faithful.

But there was no alarm, and with the coming of dawn they shook hands over the fact that they had managed to elude the search which Dupuy had made for their camp, during much of the night.

Again was a fire started, with the aid of the ever handy flint and steel. Had the boys had the misfortune to lose these almost indispensable articles, Roger knew how to create a tiny blaze with the aid of a small bow and a twirling stick. This trick he had been taught by an old traveler, who declared he had seen the natives do the same far away on islands in the East Indies. But, although Roger could accomplish the feat, it was always a difficult thing to do, and he much preferred the ordinary method of making fire from sparks made by striking flint against steel.

Finally, having loaded the horses again, and in a better fashion than before, the boys were ready to make a fresh start.

Roger wondered whether they would chance to run across the half-breed anywhere.

"He looked so angry," he said, as they started away from the rocky fortress that had made them such a capital camp, "that I believe he would think nothing of sending one of his arrows into my back as I passed some secret hiding-place; or use his rifle, if he had one somewhere at the time he started to creep up on the elk, the same way I did, wishing to save his ammunition."

"Then let us hope we will see nothing of him," observed Dick; but all the same he was a little nervous as they rode on.

And, after all, Roger's fears were not without foundation, for a short time later, as they were cantering along, they heard the twang of a bowstring. Both boys involuntarily ducked. They never knew just how close the arrow came, but both heard the hiss as it passed, and then a thud as it struck a tree.

"Run for it!" exclaimed Dick, as he dug his heels into the sides of his horse, and, bending low in the saddle, went flying forward at an almost reckless pace.

Roger followed close behind, grumbling as he rode; but there were no more arrows, and

in a short time they were able to sit upright again, although Dick continued to urge his animal to make more speed.

"That was too bad, Dick," complained Roger; "it makes my blood boil to think of the two of us running away from only one. We could have turned, and placed him between two fires, so that it would soon seem pretty hot for the coward. Why did you run away?"

"There were a good many reasons, Roger," answered the other, who was quite used to these exhibitions of recklessness on the part of his cousin, and always made it a point to explain the motives that actuated his conduct, so that the other might profit by his caution. "First of all, we could not tell how many enemies there were around us. If we had waited, we might have been surrounded by a dozen Shoshones or Cheyennes, and either killed or taken prisoners. And then again, Roger, I never want to forget that we are the messengers of our fathers, sent on a most important mission. If we choose to take unnecessary risks, and that paper never comes back signed by Jasper Williams, think of the consequences that are apt to follow. So you see that it is a wise thing for us to take no chances.

We promised our mothers that, Roger; don't forget again, when tempted to risk everything to please your own feelings."

"Dick, you're right, just as you always are, and I'm sorry I spoke that way. Yes, it would have been foolish to turn and try to punish that skulking half-breed. And he did no damage after all with his spinning arrow. Did you hear what a whistling noise it made as it passed over?"

"That was caused by the feathers being placed in a sort of winding way, so as to make the arrow whirl as it flew," Dick explained. "It made me think of the duck we call a whistler, whose wings make a sound as it flies such as you can make by blowing in a hollow reed. But we seem to have outdistanced the enemy now, and perhaps it would be safe to breathe the horses a little."

They pushed on during the whole of that day without once meeting any difficulty; although there were times when they found themselves compelled to make wide detours in order to avoid bad stretches of ground, or sloughs, where the footing was treacherous for the horses. (Note 3.)

On this account they did not make the prog-

ress impetuous Roger would have wished for, although his companion declared himself satisfied.

"Better luck, perhaps, to-morrow," he would say, whenever Roger complained; and thus the latter was shamed out of his mood.

That night they found a place to camp that was totally unlike the fortress amidst the rocks, but offered them just as secure a refuge. And again they saw daylight come without any alarm.

So three days passed away, and it was now to be hoped that they would see nothing more of the half-breed. Dick remained on his guard, all the same, for he did not mean to be caught napping.

The nature of the country had changed again, and, instead of the woods or rocky bluffs which they had left farther down the river, they now found themselves looking out on vast stretches of level prairie, where the tall grass waved in the breeze until it resembled the waters of a wide sea; and in places innumerable wild flowers dotted it like splashes of paint, making a picture that even boys could admire.

Here they would be apt to come upon many

novel things, of which they may have heard wandering trappers speak, but which up to recently they had hardly expected to see for themselves.

At the same time there would be ever-increasing danger of their being discovered by some band of red hunters, stalking antelope or bison, and ready to leave their hunting for a more convenient season if they saw a chance to capture palefaces, with their wonderful "shooting-sticks," which in those days were a source of great bewilderment to the Indians west of the Mississippi.

But nevertheless, in spite of the constant presence of peril, the two lads enjoyed the experience, and had no regrets about having started on the adventurous mission, since they were at the same time serving those they loved so well, and satisfying the craving for excitement that seems to be a part of almost every boy's nature.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE BILLOWY PRAIRIE

During this day there was hardly a stretch of half an hour but Dick and Roger made some new and interesting discovery. Now it was a little herd of antelope that, scenting the presence of human enemies on the wind, sprang from the grass where they had been lying, and went off with graceful bounds that awoke the ardent admiration of Dick, while Roger aimed his gun after them, though he was not foolish enough to waste precious ammunition when his good sense told him he had not a ghost of a show to bring the game down.

A little later they stumbled upon a village of prairie dogs, the first either of the boys had ever set eyes on. In fact, the first sign they had of the settlement was when one of the horses broke through into a burrow, and came near throwing its rider, or breaking a leg.

Then there was a great clatter as scores of the queer little fellows started to bark, and

then vanish inside their burrows, from which they later cautiously thrust their noses, curious to see what these strange intruders were like.

"Better slow down to a walk until we are clear of this place," warned Dick, as he suited his action to his words. "Did you ever see such a sight, Roger? There must be thousands of these little chaps around here; and hear the fierce way they bark at us before they run indoors."

"I wonder if they are good to eat?" asked the practical Roger, for the elk meat was all gone, and he had begun to wonder what they might find next.

"I'm sure I don't know," his cousin replied; "and I wouldn't like to try before I saw some one else eat one. The Indians are very fond of baked dog, you know; but I never heard that it was this breed. Better give that idea up, Roger; a little later we may find a chance to knock over one of those fast-running antelope, or else get a young buffalo calf for a change."

"That sounds good enough for me," remarked the other; "and so I think I'll let the prairie dogs alone just now. But look there,

isn't that a rattlesnake lying in the sun outside that burrow? ''

"Just what it is,'' Dick answered, quickly. "Which reminds me that I've been told that the snakes seem to occupy the burrows along with the dogs. Perhaps they've got some sort of arrangement between them; or else the prairie dog isn't afraid of the poison of the rattlesnake. See, there's another, yes, and even a third one, much larger than any of the rest! ''

"Ugh! wouldn't I hate to have to walk through this village in the dark! '' Roger exclaimed, with a shudder, as they passed several more snakes lying in the warm sunshine, not at all bothered by the thud of horses' hoofs.

"It's a bad job going through it, even on horseback, and in the daytime,'' Dick observed, "because you have to watch closely to keep from having the animal break through the roof of a burrow; and, first thing you know, one of those nasty rattlesnakes might be striking at the horse's legs. It would be a shame to lose so valuable an animal in that way, when we need them both so badly.''

That caused Roger to awaken to the fact that he was not paying as much attention to

his progress through the populous town as he should; and, having had his fears aroused, he now began to keep a close watch for signs of trouble ahead.

Being thus fully on their guard they were able to reach the border of the prairie dog settlement without having met with any disaster; and, the last they saw of it, several of the boldest of the natives had crept out of their burrows, and seemed to be "barking them a farewell," as Roger laughingly said.

While they were jealous concerning their ammunition, hoarding it against a possible emergency, they seldom lost an opportunity to wet a line in the great river, whenever their camp was close by the bank.

Roger always carried hooks and lines along with him, so that on the present occasion he was well equipped to capture all the finny prizes they needed for food.

Many a night, while Dick slept, the other would sit on the river bank, with his line in his hand, waiting for a bite, and seldom did his vigilance go unrewarded, so that they had fish for breakfast on numerous occasions.

It happened that once again they discovered a place where undoubtedly the expedition they

were following must have waited over night. There were the plain tracks of horses' hoofs, and also the ashes of several fires, for, being in such numbers, the explorers of the Missouri did not feel compelled to hide whenever they made camp, in order to keep their location a secret from spying eyes.

Of course Roger asked his companion to try to find out from various signs, which could be readily picked up, whether they were now any closer to the column than on that other occasion, when they rested in the abandoned camp of the explorers.

This Dick did in a most thorough fashion, and, after concluding his labors, he announced it as his belief that they had indeed gained another day.

"Is that all?" remarked Roger, evidently disappointed; and from his manner one might believe he had expected to hear Dick say they would overtake Captain Lewis by another day or so.

"On my part," declared Dick, "I think that we are doing as well as we ought to expect. All I ask is that things go right along as they have been doing. We are seeing some wonderful sights while we keep on the move

each day. And, besides, you forget, Roger, that the sooner we come up with the expedition, the sooner we must be taking the back trail. Now that we're away out here in this strange country I'd like to see all I can of it."

"Yes, that's so," Roger replied, nodding his head to show that he quite agreed with his cousin; "and, do you know, Dick, if only we could find some safe way to get that paper home, after it has been signed by Jasper Williams, I'd like nothing better than to keep right on with Captain Lewis, and go with him all the way to the ocean. Oh! what a glorious thing that would be; and what strange sights we would see when we got to the mountains we've heard so much about, that they say reach far up into the clouds, and abound in all sorts of game, such as can be found nowhere else."

Dick himself heaved a sigh, on hearing his companion speak in that way.

"Yes, that would be almost too good for us to enjoy, Roger," he said, "much as we might wish it to come true. Our first duty is to make sure that the paper gets to our grandfather, since so much depends on it. I wouldn't take any chance about its safe delivery, because we

would never forgive ourselves if it went astray."

"But, Dick, if we found that Captain Lewis meant to dispatch some of his men over the back trail, with an important message of his own, telling President Jefferson what success he had met with so far, couldn't we trust the paper in their charge?"

"Well, we won't discuss that unless the opportunity comes," the other remarked; for, to tell the truth, the temptation was almost irresistible, even to steady, reliable Dick Armstrong. Both boys possessed a strong yearning for exploration, and during their various hunts they had sought out new fields in every direction, whenever it was at all possible.

Another temptation had come to Roger with almost every hour of the day. This was the presence of innumerable prairie hens that were flying up from the long grass in every direction, as the horses passed along.

Roger kept his bow and arrows handy, and was frequently tempted to make use of them in trying for some of these plump and edible fowl, which often presented what looked like easy shots; but Dick was for hurrying, and did not wish to delay, at any time, long enough

for his companion to creep up on the "chickens."

But when they rested at noon, or in the early evening stopped to make camp, Roger would be denied his pleasure no longer, but started to stalk some of the ever present birds.

Nor was success wanting, for he succeeded in sending his feathered shafts through a brace of plump hens, which they managed to cook over a fire that was built in a hole dug in the ground, so that the flame might not be seen afar and draw the attention they sought to avoid.

Another day saw them crossing a wide stretch of the prairie, to avoid a slough that seemed to extend for many miles along the border of the river.

It had been a rather warm day, and several times they had eyed the heavens, as if half expecting that the clouds would gather and send down a deluge of rain. Up to now they had been singularly fortunate in having escaped many storms, and it chanced that those that did come had found the young explorers in some snug shelter. To be caught out on the open might not turn out to be such a pleasant thing for them.

Although they had now been on the march

for weeks, neither of the boys seemed to feel in any way anxious for their journey to end, save that Roger's impatience occasionally leaped beyond bounds; for he kept wondering whether they would find Jasper Williams after all, and their mission prove a success.

There were so many new sights to look upon as they went on, that it seemed as though they were continually expecting novel things. Around the settlement it had been pretty much all woods, so that this wonderful prairie was a source of never-ending delight to both lads, filling them with something of the same awe that one who is accustomed to the interior feels when first he sets eyes on the great ocean.

"I hope, though, we can make the river by to-morrow," Roger was saying when the sun seemed to be well down in the sky, and it looked certain that they were to make camp again in the open.

"Chances are that it lies away over yonder, where you can just see a fringe of something that must be trees," Dick observed, pointing as he spoke.

"And miles away at that, so there's no use in trying for it to-day," Roger said.

He was feeling a little provoked, for, after

begging his companion to hold up half an hour for him, when he thought he saw a chance to stalk a small band of antelopes that afternoon, Roger had spent considerable time and energy in creeping through the grass, and getting behind a *motte* of timber that grew around some little slough, only to see the timid animals flying away when he thought he must be close enough to use his bow.

He had taken revenge, however, in shooting several prairie chickens, although, having once "made up his mouth" for venison, this was a poor substitute, good eating though the birds had proved on the other occasion.

"It lies to the west of us," Dick chanced to say, as they looked toward the low fringe along the horizon which, as he had said, must be trees, and evidently bordering the river.

Later, Dick had occasion to congratulate himself that he had taken notice of the exact quarter where those trees seemed to lie, as he saw them just before sunset.

Once again they dug a hole, in which Roger expected to cook the prairie fowl which had fallen to his skill as an archer. Dick saw to the staking of the two horses, and made them additionally secure.

The clouds still hung overhead, and it would be strange if the night passed, he believed, without some sort of storm breaking over the prairie. The boys began to wish that they had their Indian tent along, for, old though it was, in a heavy downpour not a drop of water penetrated it.

Dick made preparations looking to a change of base if the threatening storm proved severe. He insisted that the bundles be kept almost intact, so that they could be fastened on the backs of the horses without the customary delay. That proved to be another fortunate move on the part of the boy, and for which he had much cause to be thankful.

The supper was finally prepared, though the fire had to be made as before from dead grass and dry buffalo chips, and was anything but a joy to Roger, accustomed as he had always been to plenty of good fuel.

Though they might have had the benefit of a fair moon but for the clouds, the latter were so dense that the night seemed inky dark. The usual noises of crickets and katydids and other insects appeared to be hushed, so that a strange silence rested on the wide expanse around them.

They were tired, and lay down soon after eating, not knowing how long they would have a chance to sleep before the coming of the storm disturbed them again. Dick, in fact, hardly expected to even doze, for he felt that some sort of watch should be kept; but, after lying there a while, his eyes gradually closed, and almost before he was aware of what was coming he went to sleep.

Neither of the boys ever knew how much time passed in this way when they were aroused by the growling of thunder, as they believed; and, sitting up, Dick called out to his companion:

"It's coming at last, Roger!"

"Yes, I heard it; but what are we going to do?" answered the other, fretfully; for the prospect of getting a wet jacket was not very inviting.

"We'll have to stand it, I guess; grin and bear it, as father says," Dick returned, being much more philosophical than Roger.

"But some of our bundles will be soaked," declared Roger.

"We can't help that; and I've made sure to wrap our extra ammunition in the water-proof cloth, so as to save it. Both of us have

our horns filled with powder, which will be sure to keep dry, no matter how we are drenched. I think I could jump into the river, and stay there an hour, without a drop getting into that good old horn father gave me long ago, and which he used himself when a boy."

In this fashion did Dick seek to buoy up the low spirits of his companion.

"It's getting closer, Dick, and that thunder is rattling pretty steady, seems to me. I'm sorry for both of us, because we're due for a fine ducking. I hope the horses don't get frightened, if the storm is a bad one, and break their ropes. Hadn't we better bring them in close by, Dick? Looks like we've got to worry over our mounts, one way or another, right along. First it's Indians stealing them; then the chance of some panther jumping the beasts for a meal; and now a stampede, if the lightning flashes too brightly, or the thunder breaks over us with a roar. How about it, Dick?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to get them in here, and keep hold of the ropes," the other replied; "horses are always more contented if they find themselves near human beings in a storm, so I've heard. So come on, then!"

They were now on their feet. The blackness of the night still held good, only every little while a flash of lightning along the horizon whence the storm was coming dispelled it for a brief interval, when they could see a long distance away.

Just as they started to get the horses Dick noticed that the distant rumbling sound had grown heavier. Suddenly he stood still, and clutched the sleeve of his companion's tunic.

"Roger, perhaps that isn't thunder we hear, after all!" he exclaimed, with a catch in his voice, as though the presence of some new and never before experienced danger influenced him.

"Why, what could it be then?" demanded the other, instantly.

"Oh! look! look yonder!" cried Dick.

Just then another friendly flash of lightning illuminated the heavens, and for the space of several seconds the prairie was lighted up almost like day. And the two pioneer boys, staring toward the region where the storm seemed brooding, saw a spectacle that chilled their blood, it was so wonderful, so full of tremendous possibilities for evil!

CHAPTER XIV

THE BUFFALO STAMPEDE

Far away, it seemed as though the whole surface of the prairie was in motion. To the right and left the boys had seen the same bewildering sight. Roger failed to comprehend what it meant, and turned to his companion for an explanation.

"What is it, Dick?" he called out.

"Buffaloes — one of those great herds we've been told about, and which stretches as far as the eye can reach!" the other replied.

"But will they come this way; and ought we saddle up so as to be ready to make a run for it?" Roger continued; not because he was timid, but that the sight of that endless, heaving mass of moving animals had impressed him strongly.

"Yes, I think we should," Dick replied. "If the storm comes along after them, and starts a stampede, as they call it, we would stand in danger of being trampled under ten

thousand hoofs. No one could ever tell what had become of us. So let's roll up our blankets, and get the horses; quick, Roger, because they're heading in our direction, and coming right along."

Indeed, even as they brought the snorting horses in, and started to fasten the loads on their backs, the rumble had increased to a steady roar, so that it seemed to Roger he could actually feel the ground vibrate under the pounding of those myriad of hoofs, as the heavy animals galloped toward the river.

Whenever the lightning flashed, and this was more frequently than before, with peals of thunder following, both boys found themselves compelled to shoot quick glances of both curiosity and alarm toward the advancing peril. And what they saw was a sight never to be forgotten.

It was like the border of a troubled sea, that tremendous line of moving animal life, heaving and tossing, and coming steadily on like a dust cloud impelled by the wind. As yet they could not distinguish the units comprising this immense whole; but it was easy to imagine them, for both boys had shot buffaloes before now, and knew what they were like, though

they had never looked upon a herd of more than half a dozen at a time.

"Oh! there must be millions in that lot!" cried Roger, when a particularly vivid flash came, that showed them the whole level stretch covered with the advancing horde as far as their eyes could reach.

"Too many for us to stay here, and try to divide!" Dick answered.

"How lucky that you noticed where the trees grew along the river," said Roger; "because that will be our best chance, don't you think, Dick?"

"Yes, and the sooner we're off the better," was the other's answer.

He knew that their horses must still be tired from the long journey of the day before, and, laden as they were, might not be able to run as swiftly as under other conditions. Just how fast that avalanche of shaggy forms could advance he had no means of knowing. If further frightened by the flash of lightning, and the crash of thunder, a stampede of the herd would mean that the bison would come on the full gallop, madly seeking to find shelter from the howling blast.

"Have we got everything, do you think?"

asked Roger, ready to mount his horse, which could hardly be held in hand, such was its terror at the approach of this thundering mass of heavy beasts; it was as though the intelligent animal understood the danger that threatened, and wanted to be on the move.

"No matter, we cannot afford to waste another minute hunting for anything now. Our lives are worth more than any other thing we possess. Get in your saddle, quick, Roger; and be careful not to let the horse throw you, or all is lost!"

The warning came not any too soon, for the fretful animal was jumping and tugging at the bridle, trying the best it could to break away, so that it might dash off, and keep a space between that approaching peril and its fleet heels.

But Roger was a pretty fair horseman, and succeeded in mounting, in spite of all the prancing of the steed. Then away they went, helter-skelter, allowing the horses to have their heads.

They tried to keep as near to one another as possible. The one danger Dick feared more than anything else was that one of the horses in this headlong gallop might set his feet in a

marmot hole, and bring about disaster; for a spill in the face of the oncoming army of buffaloes would mean that the unfortunate one must be trampled under foot, whether his horse had a leg broken or not.

When first seen the buffaloes had apparently been simply galloping steadily on, as though bent on changing their feeding grounds; but Dick, turning to look with each flash, believed he could detect a change coming over their method of advance.

This was doubtless caused by the increasing crashes of thunder that sounded high above the steady roar of those tens of thousands of hoofs beating upon the hard turf. In other words, as the oncoming storm began to overtake the drove, their gallop was fast degenerating into a stampede, when every animal would put on its best spurt, and, wild with fear, seek to outrun the threatening gale.

Already the horses were doing their best, and it was folly to dig one's heels into the sides of his straining beast, as Roger was doing, seeking to obtain a little more speed.

And now both boys began to look anxiously ahead. Despite the best efforts of the horses it seemed as though the leading buffaloes were

much closer to them than when the mad race had started; and this meant that, unless they could manage to gain the shelter of the trees, they were going to have a hard time of it avoiding disaster.

Already Roger had learned that his comrade had guessed true when he said that the indistinct line along the horizon, seen just at sunset, must be trees. They had become much more distinct by now, so that, although but a fleeting glimpse of them could be obtained when the lightning flashed, still that was enough.

And now the rain started to fall, but neither cared for that, if only it did not interfere with their striking the timber belt at its nearest point.

Probably neither of those boys would ever forget that wild ride, with the thunder booming all around them; the lightning seeming to strike here, there, and everywhere; the rain falling in a deluge that soon soaked them to the skin; and, worst of all, that endless line of galloping bison gaining constantly, as they were urged on by their fright.

Once Roger's horse stumbled, and the boy came near falling, only retaining his seat be-

cause he had firmly fixed himself there. His heart seemed to jump into his throat with a sudden fear lest the animal had lamed itself, and would prove unequal to the task of keeping ahead of the oncoming herd.

But, so far as could be seen, the horse did not show any signs of injury.

"Can we make it, Dick?"

It was necessary for Roger to shout, although at the time he could not have been ten feet away from his companion. The combination of noises all around them prevented such a small thing as a human voice from being heard, unless strained to the utmost.

"Looks like it! keep up your heart, Roger!" was the cheery reply.

But, although Dick spoke in this manner, he was not so very sure that the tired horses would be equal to the test. He almost hated to glance backward now, for it seemed to him that the advance of that endless line of pursuers must be overtaking them rapidly. Perhaps that was only his fears magnified; but it impressed Dick disagreeably, nevertheless.

In vain he racked his brain to conjure up some means by which their progress might be



"WHEN THE THUNDER STOPPED BOOMING FOR A FEW SECONDS THEY COULD HEAR THE ROAR OF THOSE COUNTLESS HOOFS BEHIND THEM."

increased. Even if they could take the time to detach some of the various packages with which they had loaded their horses, it was doubtful if such a sacrifice would avail to any considerable extent, and so Dick dismissed it as useless.

The best hope that he had lay in the chance that the trees might be somewhat nearer than they believed to be the case, owing to the impossibility of correctly gauging distances while the rain was falling, driven by the wind, and the deceptive lightning held sway.

At any rate, all they could do was to hang on, and trust to good fortune to carry them to safety. The horses were fully conscious of their danger, and could be trusted to head for the river. Besides, Dick kept his senses about him all the while, for he knew what it might mean if he allowed himself to give way.

When the thunder stopped booming for a few seconds they could hear the roar of those countless hoofs behind them. It had at least one good element about it — it spurred their horses on.

Had it been daylight, or even a clear, moonlight night, Dick might have managed to alter his course so as to strike the trees at some

point nearer than the one the frightened horses were aiming for. But in such a storm one could only keep straight ahead, and trust to luck for the rest.

Roger, for once at least, had no suggestion to make. True, he looked backward at times as though almost ready to turn at bay, and face that rolling mass of tossing black horns and shaggy heads; but the folly of such a thing must have impressed itself upon him immediately, for he kept beside his companion throughout the entire ride.

His one bullet, even granting that it found a victim, would have counted no more than a grain of sand on the seashore. And after he had fired his bolt the end must have overwhelmed him instantly; for that resistless tide would sweep on, and every object in its path would be blotted out of existence.

It seemed to Roger that his nerves had reached a point where they could stand no more. And then he heard Dick give vent to a loud shout, not of new alarm, but with a ring of triumph in it; and surely never did the sound of human voice break upon the ears of Roger Armstrong with a sweeter cadence than

when he grasped the tenor of what his companion was calling:

"The trees, Roger, the trees are at hand! Keep it up for five minutes more, and it will be all right!"

CHAPTER XV

SAFE IN THE TIMBER

That five minutes seemed a terribly long time to Roger. He could hear the oncoming herd close at hand now, so that stragglers began to pass them by on either side, and this fact gave new alarm. What if one of the buffalo chose to turn and gore the nearest horse with its wicked horns? Even though only a wound followed, it would mean a spill, and that would be the same as the end of it all.

But evidently the frightened animals had all they wanted to do in looking out for their own affairs. Perhaps they considered the running horses, with those queer bunches on their backs, only in the light of some singular fellow animals, seeking safety in flight. Roger had heard it said that, when a fire chased over these vast prairies, all manner of wild animals — deer, wolves, and buffaloes — ran side by side, only concerned in making their escape.

He had heard his father read out of the Bible about the time when the lion and the lamb would lie down together, and he guessed that it would be something like this universal fear that must bring it about.

The trees began to loom up ahead, and both lads began to feel a new concern with regard to how they could manage, first of all, to pass in among the sheltering timber, so as to avoid meeting with an accident; and then, after this had been accomplished, escape being crushed in the dense mass of buffaloes that would be surging forward, bent on finding a haven from the pelting rain.

"Be careful now, Roger!" shouted Dick, as they passed the first outlying tree.

It required considerable control over the laboring horses to keep from colliding with the obstacles that began to be strewn across their path; but by degrees the boys managed to regain control over their steeds, which were almost winded, on account of their long run; and after that it was not so difficult.

Sure enough, the river proved to be close at hand, and, finding that there was an open stretch of beach bordering it, Dick led the way along this, his object being to reach a point as

far up-stream as possible, so as to get beyond the range of the buffalo herd.

Now their horses were floundering knee-deep in the water, and again running along the shore; but all the while making progress, and that satisfied the two lads.

"That was as close a shave as we ever had, Dick!" called out Roger, who was in the rear, quite content for once to let his cousin do the leading, for he was still quivering with the recent excitement, and could hardly believe that they had come out of it with whole skins.

"Yes, and it's a good thing for us this little stretch runs along the edge of the water," was what the other answered back.

"Listen to the buffaloes coming into the timber. There seems to be no end to them. Do you think they'll crowd down to the water before we can get above the edge of the drove? Is there any end to it, Dick?" (Note 4.)

"Oh! yes," replied Dick, "and already I think we're getting to where there are not so many, for the sound of their hoofs seems less. Keep right on coming, Roger, and in the end we'll have a fire, and dry off."

"That suits me, because already I'm shiver-

ing with the cold. This thing of riding at top speed with a wet jacket isn't much fun, Dick, I tell you."

So long as there was danger that they might be trampled under the hoofs of the herd, Roger had not given his soaked condition a single thought, for the excitement kept him up. It was only after safety seemed assured that he could allow himself to consider his feelings; and then, as he said, he discovered that he was shaking all over.

Dick proved a true prophet, for after a while they managed to get to a point that seemed to be beyond the limits of the vast drove. Further down the river they could hear the greatest splashing imaginable, as thousands of the beasts pushed into the water, either to drink, or because the press behind was so great as to crowd them off the bank.

Roger was only too willing to pull up when Dick gave the word.

The rain had stopped entirely, and the mutter of thunder was only heard now in the distance, showing that the storm was past.

So the two young pioneers jumped to the ground, and the first thing they did was to slap their chilled arms vigorously back and forth,

after the customary method of starting a circulation of the blood.

"Now, how about a fire?" asked Roger.

"Wait until we stake the horses, and then I'll hunt around for an old stump, or a log, from which to tear the dry heart to make a beginning," Dick declared.

Of course these boys, having roamed the woods in search of game since they were capable of handling one of the long-barreled rifles known to the settlers of the day, understood just how to go about getting fire, no matter if everything around them seemed to be soaking wet.

Having found the needed stump, Dick used knife and hatchet, and presently announced that he had enough dry tinder to make a start.

Meanwhile Roger had also been collecting twigs that would be apt to take fire quickly, and had selected the site on which the cheery blaze should be built. In doing this he had been influenced in some measure by the idea of hiding the fire as much as possible, although the boys did not believe hostile eyes could see it in the thick timber.

Once Dick had got out his tinder box, and

his flint and steel, there was little time wasted in sending the spark where it glowed amidst the inflammable stuff, being quickly fanned into a tiny flame by the breath of the fire-maker. Matches may be a great invention, and a labor-saving device, but in those pioneer days, under favorable conditions it was amazing how rapidly an expert could light a fire. And in rainy weather the "matches" did not get wet, which must have been more or less of a consolation.

It certainly did feel good to crouch near that hot little blaze, and let their wet garments steam on them, gradually feeling warmer, and in this manner drying.

The boys knew that they could not sleep again that night, so there was no use trying. Accordingly they sat there, keeping their small fire going, and talking of the thousand-and-one things connected with their mission, and the wonderful experiences through which they were passing.

When the clouds parted overhead, and they could see the stars, it was possible for either of them to give a good guess as to how the night was passing; for, since watches were almost unknown among the settlers, every boy

was taught to read the heavenly bodies, and to observe things that might be passing around him.

So Dick and Roger knew just about when certain bright planets should set or rise; and a glance upward at any time when the sky was clear was sufficient to tell them how the day or night might be passing.

"We'll have daylight in less than two hours," Dick announced, when the break in the clouds came, allowing him to consult his "clock."

"And when it comes," Roger returned, with a shake of his head, "do you know what I intend to do? Why, try for a young buffalo with my bow and arrows. I never yet had the chance to shoot such a big animal with that Indian bow. If it can bring down an elk, why not a buffalo? And let me tell you, after the fright they gave us, I feel more like feasting on buffalo meat than ever before."

Dick declared that he would have no objection to tasting more fresh meat; and so it was arranged that, while he stayed with the outfit, Roger should set out for a little hunt.

He promised not to wander far away, and to stick to the timber belt. When Dick spoke

of this latter condition his companion laughed aloud.

"Well, you wouldn't catch me stepping out on that prairie on foot with all those savage bulls around, no, sir, not if I was paid to do it," he declared. "It was bad enough to be chased while we had our horses to depend on, and, let me tell you, I don't hanker after trying a foot race."

When the time did come he started off, while Dick busied himself in the camp, for there were numerous duties to be looked after, besides keeping the fire going. In their mad gallop the horses had managed to get some of the bundles disturbed, which was not surprising, and these had to be rearranged.

Hardly an hour had passed when Dick heard a joyous whoop, and, looking up, as his hand involuntarily reached out toward his ready firearm, he discovered his camp-mate staggering in, bearing a package of meat done up in a portion of hide.

"You were lucky, then, I see," ventured Dick, as the other threw his burden down.

"It was as easy a job as I ever had," replied Roger, panting a little after his exertions. "Why, Dick, I could have shot a dozen,

if I'd wanted, they were so thick through the timber, and seemed to be wanting to just lie there and rest. The hardest thing was to get a chance to cut up my game, after it had fallen. You see, I was afraid some old bull might take a notion to charge me; but I managed it all right, and without any fight, either."

"I hope you got a yearling, then," remarked the camp guard, as he started to open the meat pack.

"Just what I did," replied Roger. "With all those around to choose from, I picked the very choicest and fattest in sight. Oh! I can hardly wait to get some in the pan, I'm so hungry."

And so it came about that even the great buffalo stampede, that at one time had threatened to bring the journey of the young pioneers to a speedy termination, was the means of supplying them with food.

When the fresh meat was done to a turn, both lads pronounced it the very finest they had ever eaten; and somehow it seemed to remove some of the sting from their inglorious night gallop in front of the panic-stricken herd.

Then once more the forward movement was resumed; for their determination to overtake

the expedition that was piercing the Western wilderness had not abated. Accustomed to meeting and overcoming difficulties, the boys thought little of things that might seem discouragements in the eyes of those less trained in the ways of borderers and hunters.

No doubt they would see more of these shaggy animals, if they stayed any length of time upon the prairies along the upper Missouri, for at that time the buffalo entered largely into all the history of the many Indian tribes living west of the Mississippi, and pictures of its chase could be found painted on thousands of the skin teepees used by the red hunters. Its meat, when dried, afforded their families sustenance through the long winters, and the annual drive, when hundreds of the ungainly beasts would be killed, was an event that took place every autumn. If the buffalo failed to show up in numbers, it promised to be a lean year for that unfortunate tribe, and the hunters would have to keep busy after the ground was knee-deep in snow, trying to bring in moose, caribou, or other animals that did not migrate each season to the warmer southland.

It was only fair that a period of peace

should follow after a storm; and for many days the boys met with no particular adventure, but continued to make good time along the river.

At the same time they did not seem to be gaining to any appreciable extent on the explorers who were pushing on ahead; which fact gave Roger occasional fits of the blues, so that his companion was compelled to again show him that sooner or later they were bound to attain their end. For Captain Lewis had, before starting, announced that he expected to spend the winter somewhere short of the great mountain chain, which, it was believed, ran north and south somewhere in the distant country.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PERILS OF THE WILDERNESS

"I WONDER if he saw us?" Roger was saying, some days after the buffalo stampede.

The boys were thinking of halting for the night, and the western sky had taken on all the wonderful rosy tints at which even these frontier boys would gaze with something akin to awe.

"I hope not," his companion returned, with a troubled look on his sunburned face; "because that might mean new perils before morning. Up to now we've been so lucky about escaping any sort of flight with the wandering Indians that I keep hoping we may get through, and join the expedition, without any annoyance."

"But it *was* a redskin, all right, Dick; both of us saw him plain enough to be very sure of that," Roger went on.

"Oh! yes, I grant that," was Dick's answer; "but he wasn't in evidence on that little

rise more than a few minutes. We kept our horses standing still all the time, in the hope that he might not notice us. He shaded his eyes with his hand, because he was looking into the west, and that light must have partly blinded him. I only hope it was strong enough to make him miss seeing us here."

"Are we going on now?" queried the other, impatiently.

"That's the only thing left to us, Roger. By sticking close to the foot of the rise, where there are some trees to give us shelter, we may escape being seen. But no galloping for us now; just let the horses walk until the dusk comes down on us. Then we'll make camp, somehow."

"How lucky that I cooked enough of that meat at noon to last another meal. That was a time when I had my head about me, eh, Dick?" the other asked.

"It looks that way, because we must light no fire if there's a hunting party of hostile Indians around here," Dick decided.

They let the tired animals walk, keeping to the edge of the little hill beyond which, though at some little distance, lay the river.

Roger, grown very suspicious now, turned in

his saddle many times to glance in all directions. He thought more than once that he saw a crouching Indian behind some tree or bush, and his gun almost involuntarily started to leap to his shoulder. But in every case it turned out to be some deceptive shadow, and Roger was the first one to laugh at his own silly fears.

Gradually the glorious red tints died out of the western heavens; and with their passing came the troops of skirmishing shadows that told of the night.

Dick had meanwhile kept on the alert, not only to discover any lurking foe, but at the same time find a suitable spot where they could make their camp.

When he located a place that seemed to promise them fair shelter, and at the same time a feeding spot for their horses, he drew rein.

"We might as well pull up here, and settle down for the night, Roger," he announced.

So they proceeded to stake the horses out, making their own arrangements so as to be very close to the feeding animals. The grass was sweet and plentiful, and, as the horses were hungry, they started cropping it without

delay, glad to be relieved from their burdens, for the day had been a hot one.

"Perhaps," said Roger, as they started to arrange things so as to have at least some sort of comfort, "it might be wise not to undo most of our packages, since we don't mean to make a fire."

"I was just going to say that myself," the other rejoined. "Then, if we wanted to get away from here in a hurry, we'd be in condition to do so."

"Then you still have a little idea we were seen by that lone brave, Dick; and that he may bring the rest of the hunting party down on us to-night?"

"It seems to strike me that way; and so we must keep a better watch even than usual to-night," Dick observed, as he accepted some of the food his comrade took out of a package, and started to munch at it with that contentment the boys of those days learned to exhibit.

"We've been so lucky all these weeks, while following after the expedition, not to meet a single enemy face to face — unless you'd count that half-breed. If he was with François Lascelles we must have given them the slip nicely, don't you think, Dick?"

"It looks that way," Dick answered, between bites. "Pass me the old canteen that we filled with water at that fine spring late this afternoon, and I'll wash down this dry meat. We've been delayed so many times now that the summer is passing away; and, after all, it begins to look as if we might come up with Captain Lewis just when he's thinking of stopping over to pass the winter. You know we heard him say he felt sure he'd have to do that somewhere short of the big mountains the Indians tell such strange stories about, when bringing in their pelts to the trading posts."

"But no matter, we're bound to keep on, if it takes us all the way to the ocean — I've heard you say that more than once, Dick, and I know you meant it, too."

"Yes, I'm just as determined as when we started out to overtake the expedition, and have that paper signed by Jasper Williams. Every time I shut my eyes when trying to go to sleep I can see my father's troubled face, and how well do I remember discovering the tears in mother's eyes as she looked around the little home, for I know she was thinking how it would break her heart to have to give it up now."

"It must never happen, Dick. After coming this far we *must* succeed, and save the homes of our parents for them. I am twice as set on that as when we first started out. Think of all we've gone through; and yet it seems as if the Good Captain above must be watching over us, to keep all harm from overtaking us. Yes, we are going to succeed, if pluck and love can pull us through!"

In this manner the two boys buoyed up each other's courage. Nor was it at all strange that there arose now and then some necessity for such a thing. The task which they had set for themselves might have well given grown men, experienced forest rangers, cause for hesitation and doubt. The hidden perils of this unknown country had been the subject of campfire talk ever since the lads knew anything; and unconsciously their young minds had been impressed with the idea that many kinds of fierce animals inhabited the country far beyond the Mississippi, in the Land of the Setting Sun. And then there were numerous tribes of warlike Indians roving over the plains, and through the forests in uncounted numbers, and great beasts, the like of which the eyes of hunters had never before seen,

having their homes among the sky-piercing mountains lying like a barrier far toward the distant ocean.

The darkness closed in even as they ate their frugal meal and conversed in low whispers. Roger was more than ever on the alert. The many little sounds of the night caused him to listen, and try to determine whether the shrill cry of the cricket, or the monotonous call of the katydid were genuine, or some signal of creeping enemies.

When a whippoorwill suddenly gave out his loud notes from a neighboring tree, the nervous Roger started as if he had been shot, and even thrust forward a hand, as though ready to snatch up his gun.

When finally they had finished eating, Dick seemed to have made up his mind to something that had been worrying him.

"Listen to me, Roger," he said, impressively; "I was just thinking of what old Pat O'Mara told us once, of when he was in a dangerous land, and feared that the Indians might know of his camp. You remember he changed his location as soon as darkness covered his movements. And he was glad he'd done so, because, later on in that same night, he heard

shots and yells in the quarter where he had been; and knew that the redskins were pouncing on the dummy figure he had left beside a little fire. We must do the same thing now. I wouldn't sleep easily unless we made a move."

"Just as you say, Dick; you're the chief of the expedition, you know. But do you really think that Indian saw us, and perhaps followed us?"

"I seem to have an idea that way," replied the other; "several times I thought, when I turned my head and looked back, that I saw a branch fall into place, just as if some one might be watching us from behind the green covert. And once I even believed I saw a shadowy figure flit from tree to tree. No matter if it is a false alarm, Roger; it is better to be on the safe side, as father says."

"All right, whenever you say the word we'll make the move," Roger returned, "and how fortunate that we didn't undo our stuff any more than we had to, in getting the blankets out. Shall I bring the horses in now, Dick, so we can load up?"

"Yes, it is pitch dark, and we can creep on without any one seeing us, Roger. Besides, if that red spy did follow at our heels, as soon as

he saw that we meant to make camp here he must have marked the spot well in his mind, and then slipped off to hunt up the rest of the party. Perhaps they may be miles away, and it would take him hours to find them."

Roger soon had the horses ready. Then the tired boys started off. They did not venture to mount, but walked ahead of their animals, leading them. This was on account of the darkness, which was so intense that neither could see more than ten feet ahead; and even at that distance the trees bordering the little rise looked dim and uncanny, as though they might be ghosts — at least, that was the way they appeared to the imagination of Roger.

For half an hour they walked along in this fashion, sometimes stumbling over obstacles they could not see, but making steady progress all the while.

"I think we have come far enough, now," remarked Dick, finally, as he stopped in his tracks.

"Oh! I'm glad to hear you say that!" exclaimed the other, with a long drawn sigh, for he was very tired after that hot day's journey.

They soon had the horses staked out again, close at hand. Neither of the boys expected

to get very much sleep that night, for there seemed to be some strange foreboding in the atmosphere, that affected them.

As they had done on many another occasion, the boys divided the night into watches, each taking turn and turn about in keeping awake.

It was a moonless night, though the stars were bright enough. After a warm day, the myriads of insects seemed to be unusually noisy, and kept up a chorus that was soothing, rather than irritating, to the senses of Dick Armstrong, as he sat with his back braced against the trunk of a small tree.

Roger was sound asleep alongside; and, sitting there, Dick could hear the constant cropping of the horses as they continued to make a supper from the grass that grew in the open spaces, and still preserved its sweetness, despite the lateness of the season.

Now and again some distant sound would cause him to raise his head to listen; it might be the weird howl of a prairie wolf, the strange cry of a coyote, a new animal to both boys; or the hoot of an owl perched in some dead tree, and signaling to its mate.

But the night wore on, without anything out of the ordinary occurring, and Dick even be-

gan to imagine that his fears must have been groundless. Still, he could not regret having taken precautions; for it paid to be on the safe side always.

Then he suddenly sat upright. His manner indicated that his quick ears had caught some sound, however trifling, that seemed out of the common, and therefore, under the circumstances, suspicious.

It was as if a stone had been dislodged somewhere up on the little ridge, and in rattling down the side, caused a small avalanche. Still, a roving animal might have been the cause.

Dick turned his eyes upward. The top of the ridge happened to be devoid of undergrowth, and was sharply outlined against the starry heavens. One of the greatest of the planets was just about to set, and hovered above the ridge, as if on the point of sending out the last flickering gleam before dropping from sight.

Even as the boy sat there and looked, he saw something pass before this bright star. It was erect, and on two feet, therefore not an animal; moreover, Dick had seen the flutter of feathers crowning the scalp-lock, and he knew that it must be an Indian brave.

Another, and still another flitted past, until the startled lad had counted fully seventeen of the noiseless figures. Then he knew that they were heading toward the very spot where he and Roger had first intended spending the night, proving that the spy, after locating them, had indeed hurried away to summon his red companions.

CHAPTER XVII

A CLOSE CALL

Dick almost held his breath until the last dark figure had flitted past. His greatest fear had been that in some manner the keen ears of the Indians might detect the presence of horses down near the foot of the elevation along which they were making their way.

Dick waited a full minute after seeing the party vanish before making a move. He wished to be sure there were no stragglers lingering behind. And when this seemed a certainty he put out his hand, and gently shook his comrade.

"'Sh!"

Roger, starting up, heard this warning sound, and felt a thrill. He groped around until he had laid hands on his gun, placed close beside him when lying down to sleep.

"What is it, Dick?" he whispered, placing his lips close to the other's ear.

"Danger! We must get out of this right

away,'' replied the sentry, in an equally low tone.

"Indians?" asked Roger, to make sure.

"Yes. A party has just passed along the ridge. It was just our luck that they took this place to come over the hogback, Roger.''

"You saw them, did you?" demanded Roger.

"I did that; and counted seventeen,'' replied Dick, impressively; "all stepping in each other's tracks. One must have started a stone rolling down, for its clatter made me look up. They went past like ghosts, and vanished below the rim, still heading that way.''

"Ugh! you mean in the direction of our first camp, don't you, Dick? Then that lone hunter must have sighted us, even if he did pretend not to. How wise you were to change camps. Seventeen, you say; what could two boys do against that many braves? What next, Dick? I'm ready to do anything you say. Must we push on again, do you think?"

"Yes, because when they find that the birds have flown they will surely look this way for us. By that time we ought to be miles off.''

They set about making the move without more delay, though not hurrying in such a

manner as to invite discovery through neglect of precautions.

The poor horses no doubt thought it pretty hard that they should be made to start out afresh without even a nap; but they were patient beasts and had no way of expressing their opinions, or showing signs of mutiny at being made to work overtime.

Once again did the boys lead the animals, for the darkness was too intense to trust to keeping their eyes so far away from the ground, when there was so much necessity for their discovering the presence of logs and pit-falls before the horses stumbled. Roger, if left to himself, would possibly have climbed into his saddle, and trusted to the instinct of his animal to detect obstacles in the way, but Dick was too cautious for that.

So they plodded on. It was weary work, but the knowledge that a deadly peril lurked near inspired the boys to endure the fatigue bravely.

"You seem to be veering off to the side, Dick; we're getting farther and farther away from that ridge, back of which lies the river. What is that for?" asked Roger, after a while.

"In the first place," replied the other, always willing to explain, "when the Indians find out that we've slipped away, they are likely to scatter, and search the woods for miles, believing that they may get trace of us in that way. Then, Roger, I'm too tired to think of keeping up this walk long. I want to get in the saddle, and ride, which we can do if once we find the open country."

"Good for you, Dick; I'll be glad myself when we can mount, and coax the horses to a gait faster than a walk," Roger declared.

Several times Dick had paused. He seemed to be listening, and it was not difficult for his companion to guess why.

"Do you expect to hear them give tongue when they find the nest empty?" he asked.

"Perhaps," replied his cousin. "They will be bitterly disappointed, that goes without saying; and when they strike a light, and start to following our tracks, as I'm sure they will do, we will probably hear them. Listen, Roger. What did I tell you?"

The night wind chanced to be coming from a point almost directly back of them, so that sounds were carried on its breath. First came a long quavering cry that seemed to be filled

with bitter disappointment. Then followed a series of quick, angry yelps, that made Roger think of a pack of fighting dogs.

"They know now that we've given them the slip, don't they, Dick?" chuckled Roger, whom even the recent peril did not seem to have daunted.

"They certainly do," answered the other.

"But here is what seems to be another little rise on our left, Dick," observed Roger, as what looked like a secondary ridge arose between them and the star-studded heavens.

"Yes, I've been noticing that for some little while now," Dick answered. "And I'm sure that just on the other side lies the level prairie that we want to reach soon."

"Then we must cross over that divide; is that the way, Dick?"

"When we come to a place where we can do it without exposing ourselves too much. Remember how I happened to discover the seventeen braves, Roger; though they would be too far away, perhaps, to see us crossing over. And here seems to be the right spot to make the attempt. I hope we find a trail for the horses, because they are not able to climb rocks as we can."

A short time later they were slowly but steadily passing up from the little valley that lay like a swale between the two slight ridges.

"This is all right, Dick," remarked Roger, when, after some toil, they managed to reach what seemed to be the pinnacle of the "hog-back," as the border boys called such a ridge.

"Yes, and if the going down is as easy, we can thank our stars," answered Dick.

Before starting the descent he turned and looked long and earnestly in the direction whence those cries of disappointment had arisen a short time before.

"There, what did I tell you?" he exclaimed; "look yonder, Roger, and you will see something queer."

"Are they fireflies, Dick?" questioned the other; "they seem to look like it at this distance; and yet I can see that they do not come and go, but keep up a steady light."

"If you were closer, Roger, you would see that they were strange lightning-bugs; for each one is a torch gripped in the hand of a red-skinned warrior, who bends over and follows the trail we made!"

"Oh! then we didn't start away from our second camp any too soon, did we, Dick?" ex-

claimed the younger lad, breathlessly, as he watched the lights that really did look like flickering fireflies in the distance.

"No; and now we'd better be getting off this high ground before they come close enough to discover us," Dick remarked.

"But what is going to be the end of all this running about?" asked Roger. "Do we have to keep on the jump all night? See, the stars tell us it is even now close on midnight, for there is that other bright one just going to set. I've had two hours or more of sleep, but you haven't yet closed your eyes, Dick."

"Oh! there's time enough for that after we've left these red rascals miles behind, Roger. Once we strike the level prairie it's going to be a job urging our horses on by digging heels into their sides, much as I hate to do it. There is a limit to the distance even hardy braves can walk, following a trail by torchlight; and we'll put a lot of ground between us before we rest."

They found that it was not very difficult to pass down the other side of the slope, for their horses were sure-footed, and the way far from being impassable. And presently the bottom was gained.

Here there were a few scattered trees, that gradually the boys left behind, until presently the open prairie lay before them.

"Now to mount!" declared Dick, suiting the action to the word.

Roger was not a whit behind him in climbing into his saddle. It was no easy job doing this on account of the many bundles with which both horses were burdened, so that "climbing" would seem to cover the case very well.

When the horses were urged to start off on a gentle gallop Roger declared he felt very much like giving a whoop, to signify his delight at having so cleverly outwitted the red foe; but his cousin advised him to hold his breath.

"You know, Roger," Dick said, in his quiet but convincing way, "that old Pat O'Mara, our father's best friend, used to say an Indian had no business to crow until he was in the woods, and by the same token a white was a fool to shout till he was well out of them. And though we're over the divide, and riding on level country, we are not beyond the danger line yet. So, if you're wise, you'll bottle up that cheer until we see the expedition of Captain Lewis, boats and horses, ahead of us."

And of course Roger held his peace, for he had considerable respect for the opinions of his older companion.

They must have covered at least six or eight miles before the horses showed unwillingness to go farther without a rest. Dick then announced that they had come far enough.

And so once more, for the third time that night, the lads staked the animals out, and lay down on their blankets under the twinkling stars.

Roger insisted on his cousin taking a turn at sleeping, while he sat there and kept vigil; which Dick finally did, though a little loath to shut his eyes. However, he secured quite a few hours' nap; and then Roger awakened him, so that he might in turn get a little more sleep before the coming of another dawn warned them that it was time to proceed.

Morning found them fairly rested after their hard night, and so far as they could tell there was no sign of the Indians. Evidently the hunting party had given up all hope of overtaking the fugitives when they found that the horses had climbed the ridge and struck the level country beyond.

Another day and still others followed, during which the boys kept sturdily heading into the northwest. It seemed so strange to them that, on account of the many hindrances, they could not overtake the explorers, who were always just a few days' journey ahead of them.

Of course this was caused by the fact that the boys had frequently to make detours in order to avoid Indian villages that they discovered on the river bank; and in more than a few cases these circuits were the cause of their losing the river entirely, so that they wasted one or more days hunting for it again.

But their dogged determination to attain the object which had caused them to start on their undertaking never flagged. No matter what difficulties beset them, they would keep everlastingly at it until they had met with disaster, or else succeeded in their quest.

It was this spirit of never-say-die that made frontier boys develop into the resolute men they afterwards became; and which caused them to continually push out farther and farther into the unknown land until finally they had conquered the whole West, to trans-

form the wilderness into one vast fertile region, where the grain to feed the nations of the world was to be grown later on; and the vast herds of long horned cattle were to graze by hundreds of thousands, taking the place of the vanishing bison.

Of course they met with many sights which were novel to their eyes, and would always remain fresh in their memories. But after all these weeks of journeying over the prairie, they were by degrees becoming quite familiar with the conditions connected with this new life; and as they became accustomed to them the boys grew more adept in accepting chances to creep up on antelope and scattered bison, so as to secure a shot and thus provide themselves with fresh meat.

On one occasion Dick had found an opportunity to try a clever expedient that he had heard spoken of by other hunters, but never before practised himself.

It happened that several antelope were feeding at some little distance from a bunch of grass in which the hunter had ensconced himself, in the hope that they would wander that way.

He had his rifle, since on that level stretch

of ground it was not likely that any Indians might hear the report, or if they did, attach any special meaning to it.

Since the shy little animals did not seem to be feeding that way, Dick realized that if he hoped to get any fresh meat that day he must resort to some ruse. Having a red handkerchief with him, he conceived the idea of attempting the trick those old hunters had spoken about.

The antelope seems to have more than average curiosity, and will allow this failing to have full sway even when its instincts give warning of danger.

So Dick, fastening this red kerchief to the muzzle of his gun, waved it above the tuft of grass behind which he lay concealed.

The timid animals soon noted the strange bright object that waved in the breeze and at first started to run away; then, halting, they stared long and eagerly, by slow degrees coming back, only to turn and run again. But there seemed to be a fatal fascination in that queer red banner which they found utterly impossible to resist; and so closer and closer they drew, quivering with suspense, and apparently ready to fly if it should turn out to be

an enemy, relying on the speed of their heels to carry them to safety.

But alas! they knew nothing of the "stick-that-spoke," and sent out a death-dealing pellet of lead.

Dick had watched their coming and going, and noted that each time they advanced just a little farther than before. He believed that he was going to be given the chance he craved for a shot. This pleased him, for they had been without fresh meat for three days.

Finally the young hunter believed the antelope had come close enough, and that it would be folly for him to wait any longer.

Accordingly he selected the one he thought best suited for their purpose as food, and, having disengaged the red handkerchief from the end of his rifle, so that it might not interfere with his aim, he quickly covered the body of his intended victim with the white bead that he used for an end-sight, and pulled the trigger.

At that the herd of antelope sped away like the wind; but one did not keep company with its mates, for the bullet of the hunter had laid it low.

Dick felt more or less compassion for the

little animal when he saw how delicately it was fashioned, and how innocent it appeared; but then he had been a hunter ever since he could lift his father's rifle, and would not allow this feeling to have dominion over him, especially when they were in such need of fresh meat. So he was cutting up the game when Roger, who had kept the horses far away, came hurrying to the spot.

CHAPTER XVIII

BROUGHT TO BAY BY THE WOLF PACK

"WHAT does this mean, Dick?" Roger asked, some days later, when they started to make a fire in the morning and found the air quite cold. "Does winter come so early in this northwestern country?"

"Oh! no, it isn't that," replied the other; "but, since the wind has whipped into the north during the night, and there's been a storm somewhere, we're in for a cool spell. I hope frost is far from us, because we have so much to do before that time. But a fire will feel good, and I think we might take chances."

They had not seen any signs of Indians for some time now, but Dick was too cautious a boy to relax his vigilance on this account. Nevertheless, after the light of day had come, he believed they could make a fire out of smokeless wood that was not apt to betray their presence in the vicinity.

During this day they journeyed through

dense timber, which was quite a change from crossing the wide, level stretches of country lying along so much of the upper reaches of the Missouri.

All the time they had to make sure of several things, especially the presence of the river not far away; and then the important fact that the exploring expedition sent out through the efforts of President Jefferson was still ahead of them.

It would have been a sad joke on the boys had they managed in some manner to outstrip the soldiers and voyageurs with Captains Lewis and Clark, and in this way gone ahead of them.

To make positive that this was not the case they were compelled to keep close to the river, looking for signs of an abandoned camping-place; and when such was discovered they found means to read the telltale evidence that denoted just how many days' journey in advance were those they sought.

It was while they were jogging contentedly along during this particular morning that Dick suddenly drew rein, and raised a hand with a movement that his companion understood meant that he was to listen.

From some point ahead they caught peculiar sounds — a snapping and crackling, accompanied by dull thuds that mystified Roger greatly.

"Why, what can that be, Dick?" he asked, turning a perplexed face toward his companion, and at the same time fingering his always ready gun.

"Let's move slowly forward, and find out for ourselves," was Dick's suggestion, which appeared to please his cousin, since both at once urged the horses ahead.

As they kept on the noise increased in volume; and accompanying the other sounds they could now hear snortings, and what seemed to be the snarls of beasts. Then came a plain yelp as of pain, followed by more prancings, and another of those dull thuds, as of a heavy body striking another, the impact causing the hollow sound.

"Seems like a fight," said Roger, in a cautious tone, not removing his eyes from in front, where he now believed he could see the bushes waving, as if various objects were in motion beyond.

"That's just what it must be," Dick agreed.

In another minute they had reached a point

where they could look upon one of the tragedies of the border, such as were in progress in season and out, hundreds of years before Columbus ever sailed into the western seas, to find a new route to the East Indies, and thereby discovered a new continent instead.

A noble old stag was at bay, with a pack of hungry wolves trying their best to drag him down. Already had he placed two of the gray beasts on their backs, and several of the others seemed to have suffered from contact with the sharp points of his antlers.

They had succeeded in running him down; perhaps a wound in one of his legs had prevented the game old fellow from escaping as easily as he might have done under ordinary conditions. The boys never knew how it came about; but there the stag was, with lowered head, doing his best to defend himself against his foes.

No doubt, had the combatants been left to fight it out in their own way, the tenacious wolves would in the end have pulled the old stag down, and made a meal off his carcase; for he seemed pretty well exhausted by this time, and there were still half a dozen of the savage brutes able to fight.

But Roger could not stand such a spectacle. He sympathized with the gallant old buck, and, slipping from his horse, bow and arrow in hand, crept forward, meaning to put in a few "licks," as he called them, in favor of the animal that was outnumbered six to one.

Dick sat there, holding his rifle, and not wishing to waste any of his precious ammunition unless it seemed necessary. He knew he could depend on his comrade not to injure the brave buck, whose tough meat would be of little use to them for food. And, after the way in which he had fought the whole wolf pack, it seemed as though he deserved a better fate than being shot down.

The boy with the Indian bow succeeded in creeping close enough to get a good view of the performance. The actors in the forest tragedy were too excited and intent on their business to notice anything else. Even the usually wary pests of the timber were goaded to fury by this determined resistance on the part of their intended prey, and seemed wild to bring him down.

Roger never enjoyed anything more in his life than when he took a quick aim, and sent a feathered arrow flying toward the nearest of

the pack. The beast went over in a heap, and Dick chuckled when he saw the end of the arrow projecting from that gray side.

Working like a machine Roger fitted another missile to his bow, and again that fatal twang announced that the badgered stag had a new ally close by; for a second wolf rolled over, howling dismally.

By that time the balance of the pack began to awaken to the fact that there was something strange in the actions of their companions. Perhaps they allowed themselves to ignore the wounded stag for a moment, and sniff the air. At any rate, there was a sudden flight on the part of the four animals still able to run; and the stag found himself master of the field.

"Hurrah!" shouted Roger, unable to restrain his feeling of elation as he stepped in sight, waving his foxskin cap in triumph.

"Take care," called out Dick, warningly, "or the stag may turn on you; he doesn't know that you mean to be his friend; and it would be a shame to have to kill him, after the handsome way he stood off that pack!"

But the animal, while half disposed to attack this newcomer, being doubtless flushed with his apparent victory over the wolves, pres-

ently deemed discretion the better part of valor; for, turning, he went off at a limping pace.

"Good-by, and good luck!" called Roger after him, as he stepped forward to knock one of the wounded wolves on the head with his hatchet, so as to recover his two arrows.

Under ordinary circumstances the boys would gladly have halted to remove the skins of the wolves that had fallen, where the antlers of the stag had not ruined the pelts; but just now they could not think of such a thing. Their horses had all they could safely carry, and it would be the height of folly to think of increasing the load.

Although these lads had done considerable hunting during the last five or six years this happened to be the first time they had ever been given a chance to witness one of those forest battles which took place so often. True, once they had found the skeletons of two deer in the woods, and from the fact that their antlers were interlocked tightly, so that they could not possibly be pulled apart, it was evident that in a fight the bucks had become so attached to each other in this way that they could not separate, and that consequently they

had starved in the midst of plenty, falling victims to their own passions.

On other occasions, when their journey led them through the vast prairies, other matters engaged their attention. Of course they had to make camp where night found them; and often it was far out on the billowy sea of grass, where they built their small fire in a hole dug in the ground, and spent the night in watchfulness and security.

But sometimes these nights were not as quiet and peaceful as they could wish. Until recently neither of the boys had seen a cowardly coyote; but often these scavengers of the plains seemed to scent the fresh meat which the boys had with them; and, taking up positions a short distance from the camp, they would make night hideous with their yelping.

After the boys had become accustomed to this discordant chorus they minded it very little. Had it been wolves they would have kept constantly on the alert lest the treacherous beasts pull down one of the horses; but these thieving coyotes did not have the courage to attempt such a bold deed, and could only hang around, watching for a chance to steal something when no one was looking. They

might be called the sneak-thieves of the plains, while the gray wolf might be likened to the dashing pirate — bold, aggressive, and sometimes undaunted.

There was one night when these beggarly coyotes seemed to be more persistent than ever. Roger remarked that they came in closer, and several times he looked as though he would like nothing better than to go out and try to " pot " a few by means of his ever-ready bow.

However, Dick thought the animals hardly worth noticing, since their cowardly traits made them afraid to venture close enough to steal anything.

Of course he raised no objections when his companion declared he meant to set a trap, and teach at least one sneaking coyote a lesson. Roger was a clever hand at all sorts of snares and liked nothing better than laying one, whereby he might match his wits against those of a cunning beast.

So, taking his hatchet, and some bits of wood which they had brought along in case of need in cooking supper, he began pounding these down into the soft ground. In this way he constructed what seemed to be an avenue,

about a foot broad, leading up to the place where he expected to place the bait of his gun-trap.

Finally he fixed his rifle in such a manner that it aimed directly down this enclosed section, and if it were discharged any creature between the parallel lines of stakes would be very apt to get shot.

When the trap was set Roger chuckled, and seemed to take considerable boyish pleasure in anticipating the surprise of the hairy thief, when, upon creeping stealthily along the limited space, he snapped at the tempting bait, only to have it apparently develop a sting, accompanied by a crash like thunder.

Dick had watched all these preparations with amusement. He knew how much pleasure the other took in managing these little surprises, for he had often observed Roger spending time fixing a trap for a fox, or it might be a bear. It had become what might be called a hobby with the boy, and in such matters he had few equals among the lads of the St. Louis settlement.

"Remember, and don't be frightened out of your skin if you hear a shot some time to-night, Dick," was the warning the maker of

the trap gave, as he pronounced his work fit for business.

"I'll try not to," observed the other, then adding: "and I hope that if it succeeds, as you expect, the sound won't bring any hostile Indians down on us. But at sundown there was nothing in sight, and that was why we dared to have our fire."

It was just half an hour later that the boys jumped as though they had been shot, when the gun went off with a tremendous report. Dick immediately burst out laughing.

"That's a joke on you, Roger, as sure as anything!" he exclaimed, when he could speak; "telling me not to be alarmed when your trap worked, and then nearly having a fit yourself. But let's look, and see if you got your game."

There was no doubt about that, for a dead coyote was found in the passageway between the stakes, looking for all the world like a thin, half-starved dog. This was the first time either of the boys had seen one of the animals close, and Roger was disgusted to think he had wasted a charge of powder and a bullet on the miserable beast.

"That trap will do for once, but I'm done

shooting such scurvy things," he declared, as he dragged the game out a short distance, and left it, in the hope that some of the other coyotes would dispose of it before morning; which they certainly did, for they could soon be heard snarling and quarreling as though there were too many guests at the banquet.

After that, when the coyotes howled, and made things disagreeable, Roger would take up his gun, fondle it for a minute, as temptation whispered at his heart, and then with a shake of his head he would place it once more on the ground as though he could not be coaxed to come down to such poor shooting. And so long as the miserable brutes kept clear of the camp, and did not annoy their horses, the chances were that they would be left alone to continue their nightly serenade.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LOST RIVER

When several more days had passed, and the boys found that they had again lost track of the river in seeking to save time by making a cut-off, Roger was very much downcast.

There was some reason for this, too, since it had really been his fault; Dick thinking it best to stick to the river, while his cousin argued that they would gain a whole day by saving the time spent in following the winding course of the stream.

And so they had struck out, taking more chances than were perhaps advisable under the circumstances. And now neither could say in which direction they must look in order to once more come upon the river.

Dick did not attempt to chide his companion. On the contrary, he even took a part of the blame on his own shoulders, and in speaking of the mistake, if such it should prove to be, always used the words "*our* blunder." He

knew very well that Roger was suffering enough without having "salt rubbed into his open cuts." And the chances were, no matter how the experiment turned out, Roger after that would be slow to insist on having his own way.

Dick went about it in a cool, matter-of-fact way. He consulted his crude little chart, made up pretty much at a guess, for information had come in a dozen roundabout ways, none of which were strictly reliable. Then he took his bearings with relation to the sun, their previous course, and some other things that seemed to have an intimate connection with the case.

After that he laid out a new trail, and marked it on the map, explaining to his admiring and now repentant companion just how he believed they must head in order to once again reach the Big Muddy.

"And I feel so sure that we will strike it by keeping on toward the north that we must let nothing turn us from that course," he ended, with a ring to his voice that told of determination.

"What if we run on to an Indian village, because we are now in the country of the Shoshones, you know?" Roger remarked.

"Then we'll just wait for night," replied the other, quietly, "and pass the wigwams by as close as we dare; for I would not want to make too wide a circuit. And now let us make a fresh start."

This had been on the previous day to the one on which we again find the undaunted lads pushing directly into the north, bent on finding the river again.

Once more had the character of the country changed. The prairie had given place to rolling land, where grew stretches of trees. In the distance they could even see low elevations that might be called hills. Roger had been looking eagerly toward these, and hoping that they would re-discover the Missouri among them. Now that the river was lost it seemed to have additional value in the eyes of the two boys; and it was certain that they would welcome the first glimpse of its swiftly flowing waters with delight — at least Roger felt sure he would.

The sun was getting rather low in the heavens again, and once more they would soon have to be looking for some place to pitch their camp; but it was not so serious a matter when surrounded by a forest, where wood was in

abundance, and numerous chances for hiding a cooking fire abounded.

Truth to tell, both boys always felt more at home when in the woods. They had been accustomed to seeing trees all around them; and those apparently endless level prairies, where not a stick of timber could be seen as far as their eyes traveled, rather appalled them, and made them feel almost helpless. One had to grow accustomed to these vast solitudes, and the monotony of that waving sea of grass, before he could feel at home.

"Keep your eyes well about you as we ride on, Roger," Dick warned, not in a way to create alarm in the mind of his companion, but as though he wished to remind him that their policy was always to be prepared for emergencies, and never to be caught off their guard.

"You haven't seen any sign of Indians around, I hope?" asked Roger, suspiciously.

"No, I'm glad to say not; but then there are sometimes other dangers lurking in a wood like this. They have panthers out here as well as we did down near our homes. And, while such a beast may never have set eyes on white people before, I reckon he'd jump down at us

just as quick as if we were red boys, if it so happened that he was hungry."

"Yes, the panther is a sly beast, but when pressed for a meal he will take chances every time," returned Roger. "You remember that one we met in the timber on a winter's day, just as the snow-storm commenced to gather. I saw him leave the limb just in the nick of time. I think he gave a little snarl as he sprang; and if it hadn't been for that he might have borne me to the ground. As it was I managed to duck like a flash, so that he leaped right over me; and before he could swing around after recovering, your rifle had spoken, and it was all up with Mr. Panther."

"Yes, and cases are known when men have been attacked openly on the trail by these gray woods terrors," Dick went on, as though the subject possessed a certain fascination for him.

"The trouble is," Roger continued, "you never know just how to take one of them. Sometimes a panther may seem to be the biggest coward going; and another day the same beast wouldn't hesitate at attacking three men. Some hunters say they get crazy fits, and, when one of these comes on, the person who

runs across a panther had better look out. But if I see a 'painter,' as old Pat O'Mara used to call them, I'm ready to give him the compliments of my gun, and without any palaver, too."

After that they lapsed into silence, each doubtless occupied with his thoughts. Indeed, they had much pressing on their young minds about this time, when the fate of their mission was still in serious doubt. If it should fail, and all their long trip have been taken for nothing, they did not really know how they should have the courage to turn back, and retrace all these weary hundreds of miles down the river.

And whenever Roger became silent it could be taken for granted that he was allowing his thoughts to roam in a certain direction; in imagination picturing the happy day when he and his cousin would reach the home settlement, bringing with them, duly signed and witnessed, the precious document that was to bring such happiness to their loved ones.

The horses plodded on, with Dick keeping a guiding hand on his bridle, and occasionally glancing to the right, and to the left. Then he would look upward, so as to get his bearings

from the position of the westering sun, which was of course on their left now, and could only be seen now and then, when there came a rift in the timber.

They would soon be compelled to pick out a camp site, for the day had almost reached its close. Roger was sighing because they had failed to reach the river, as he had fondly hoped would be the case at the time they started out that morning. And he was mentally chiding himself for the twentieth time that day, on account of having insisted on the experiment of saving time by taking a "cut-off." No matter what the temptation might be, he was determined never again to try and influence Dick when the other thought differently from him. Dick was a born guide. He always figured things out accurately, and was seldom if ever known to go amiss when leading the expedition out of trouble; whereas he, Roger, was a bungler and only fit to tag behind, ready to assist.

Neither of the boys had spoken a word for nearly ten minutes. Roger was waiting to hear his comrade say that they had better pull up, and stop for the night. Much as he wished to halt, and prepare supper, for he was really

hungry, he would not mention the fact to Dick, being too proud to exhibit any weakness. And the memory of how he had brought about all this trouble hung like a heavy burden upon Roger's mind just then.

Around them the silence of the forest was broken only by the chattering of little ground squirrels, known to-day as chipmunks; or it might be the scolding of the hasty tempered bluejay in the branches of a cottonwood tree.

When, therefore, a sound of an entirely different nature struck upon the ears of the boys, they were greatly startled. It was almost a shriek, and both were of the impression that it was a woman's voice.

Their horses began to prance, as though the unusual noise had given them a start, or else from some other unseen cause.

These boys of the border had always been brought up to be courteous to the other sex. They would go far out of their way to render aid to a woman or child in distress. And therefore, when they heard what seemed to them to be a cry of terror, and apparently in a woman's voice, the first thought of both was to dig their heels into the sides of their horses,

and urge the beasts forward in the direction whence the sound seemed to come.

It struck them as strange how unwilling the animals seemed to be to advance; and this fact caused Dick to entertain suspicions. Either Indians were about, and the intelligent beasts knew it, or else some sort of terrible wild animal lurked among the thickets close by, and had been scented by the horses.

But, under the urging of their masters, even the horses had to give way, though it was evident that they made the advance with reluctance.

And in this fashion, then, did they break through the screen of bushes, so that they stood upon the border of what seemed a forest glade.

What they discovered there was a picture neither of the lads would ever forget.

An old Indian squaw was brandishing a heavy billet of wood, which she had evidently hastily snatched up. Cowering under her protecting arm was a little girl of perhaps seven years of age — a pretty child, though undoubtedly also an Indian.

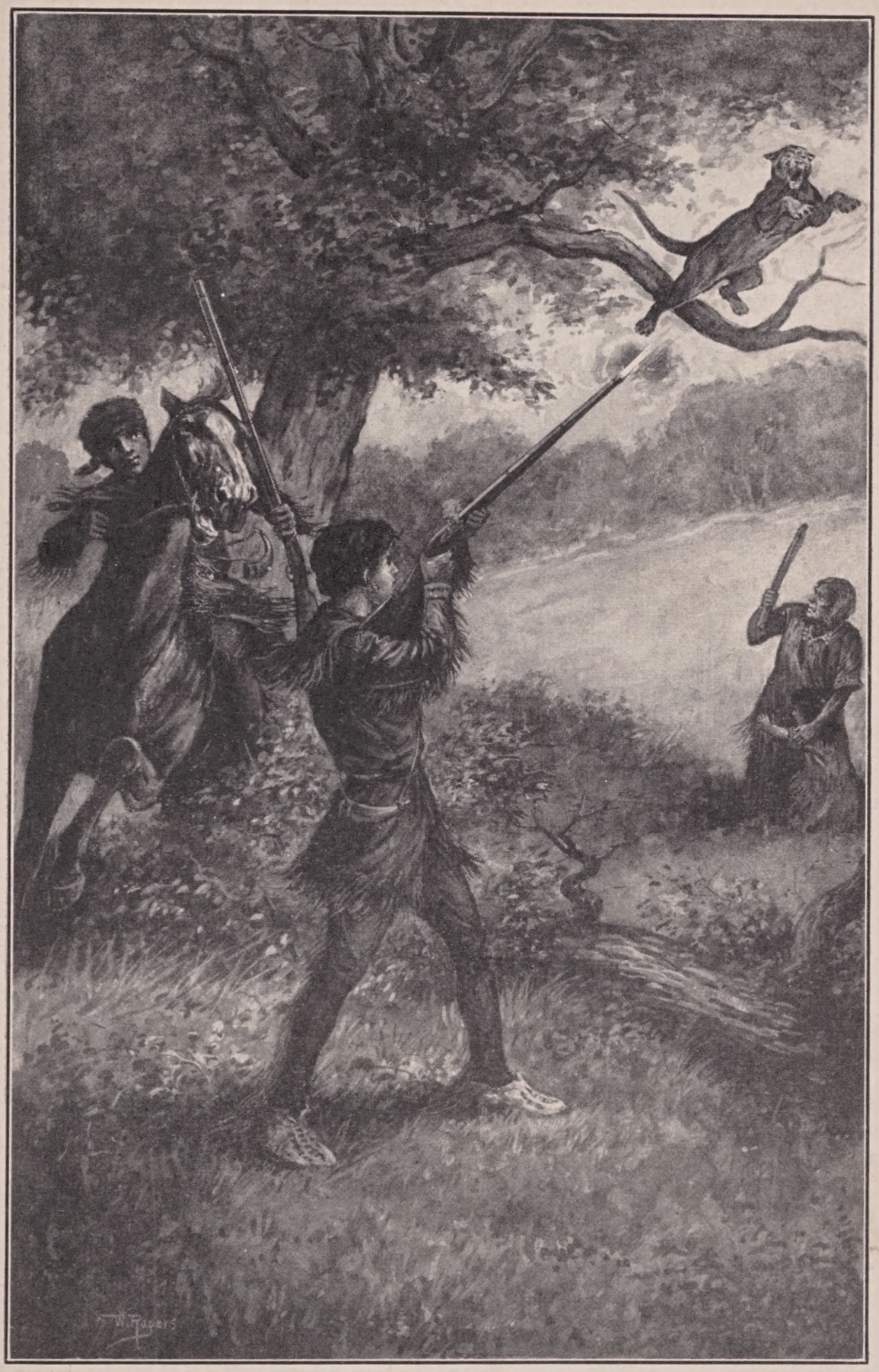
And crouching on the limb of a nearby tree, lashing its tail to and fro, as it worked itself

up into a rage in order to launch forth upon its intended victims, was the largest gray panther either of the boys had ever seen.

It had come upon the squaw and her helpless charge suddenly, and, with the craftiness of its kind, was holding back its final spring, just as a domestic cat will allow a mouse to crawl away before pouncing on it.

At any second now the terrible beast might launch itself out, and crush the brave old squaw under its weight.

It was impulsive Roger, always as quick as lightning to act, who was the first to hurl himself into action.



"WITH THE SHARP CRASH OF THE GUN THE GREAT GRAY BODY OF THE CROUCHING BEAST FLEW UPWARD."

CHAPTER XX

CASTING BREAD UPON THE WATERS

The presence of the panther so terrified the horses that they kept up a continual prancing; and it would have been next to impossible for any one to have taken a sure aim while in the saddle.

Roger understood this, for his first act was to slip from his seat, gun in hand. His next was to draw back the hammer of his rifle. It was to be hoped that the powder lay properly in the pan, so that there would be no false flash.

Dick, too, had gripped his rifle, and was bent on using it to the best of his ability in case his comrade failed to kill the panther, though he had confidence in the marksmanship of Roger.

The time could be measured only in seconds, from Roger's leaving his saddle to when he pressed the trigger. And with the sharp crash of the gun the great gray body of the crouching beast flew upward, with all of its legs in motion at once.

It fell almost at the feet of the Indian squaw, who drew back her charge, and at the same time kept her stout cudgel ready, so as to make use of it in case of necessity.

But there was no such need. Roger's bullet had done its work well; the ferocious beast was already quivering in its death throes.

"Good shot, Roger!" cried the gratified Dick, as he lowered his own gun.

The other was already reloading his long rifle. That was a hunter's instinct which had been impressed so urgently on the minds of these boys when mere striplings that they could never neglect the precaution. An empty gun is the nightmare of a wise hunter, for it makes him worse than helpless.

Roger was making haste, wishing to be the one to add the finishing touches in case anything more was needed; but such did not prove to be the case, for even as he completed the task of reloading his weapon the animal expired.

Dick was by now out of his saddle. He found a place to hitch his horse by tossing the bridle over a broken limb, caught the second animal's lines and did the same; after which he turned for a look at the strange pair who

had been saved from death, it might be, through the coming of the white boys.

The squaw was not much different from all of her kind, being wrinkled, and squat of figure as one accustomed to bearing heavy loads, for it is the women who do all the work in Indian villages, while the braves hunt, and carry on wars.

Evidently the squaw did not know whether to look upon these strangers in the light of friends or enemies. True, one of them had saved her charge and herself from a terrible fate; but then the white boys might decide to make prisoners of them, and carry them far away to their settlement.

She still gripped her cudgel, and her beady black eyes flashed fire as Dick approached. He saw that she was like a fox at bay, and ready to meet him half way if he gave evidence of wishing to do them harm.

So Dick, who had hastily slung his gun to his back by means of the strap, held up both his hands, palms extended toward the squaw. That is the universal "peace sign," recognized all over the world, even among the blacks of darkest Africa.

The wrinkled face of the squaw lost some of

its grimness. She even seemed to smile a little, Dick thought; at any rate those fierce black eyes glistened in a friendly way as she nodded her head, and also held up both hands, letting the club fall to the ground.

"Friends — no hurt squaw, pappoose. How come here? Much bad job, panther. Shake hands. Me Dick!"

Although it might have seemed a little comical, the way the boy expressed himself, somehow, either through her knowledge of a little English, or because his gesture explained more than his few words did, the squaw seemed to understand him. She accepted his hand, and her black eyes snapped some more when he gave her fingers a friendly squeeze. Thus it is possible for two people to communicate, even when language fails.

"Me Karmeet, pappoose Dove Eyes. Prisoner so long in Shoshone village. Get away. Now on trail to lodges of Sioux. Much good paleface boy, shoot big cat. Ugh!"

And that was about the extent of her willingness to impart information. Whoever Karmeet might be, she evidently had long ago been taught that it was a woman's place to hold her tongue when any of the other sex were around.

"We make camp, have meat to eat. Karmeet hungry; Dove Eyes want food. You much welcome join us. Stay all night in camp. In morning go to Sioux wigwam. How?"

Dick in this way was trying to make the squaw understand that they were about to halt for the night, and camp; also that she and her charge would be perfectly welcome to stay there, and share in the supper of the white boys.

Roger looked at the lined face to see whether she understood, and immediately realized that Dick knew how to go about it; for again she nodded her head, looked anxiously at the girl, and then muttered:

"We stay night with paleface boys. Much good. Karmeet remember. Ugh!"

And so the two young pioneers went about the duties of the hour as though they were alone. They carefully selected the place where the fire was to be made; and the keen eyes of the squaw followed all their movements with considerable curiosity. Roger, looking up later, saw her nodding her head, and from this he understood that she approved of their cunning in thus providing against discovery of the small blaze by hostile eyes.

The horses were provided with a feeding place, because there was grass in the forest glade where the wandering Indian squaw and her charge, in escaping from one peril, had almost met their fate in another way.

Then supper was started. When Roger prepared to cook the meat, to his amusement it was taken from his hands by the old squaw, who insisted on carrying out the rest of that labor — though possibly the lads might have preferred to do it their own way. But evidently Karmeet had all her life been accustomed to never seeing a warrior bending over the fire whenever there was a squaw in the camp; they might do the drudgery when out hunting, or on the warpath, but never at home. That was a woman's duty.

There was plenty for all. Little Dove Eyes had been visibly frightened at first sight of the white boys, for doubtless they were the only palefaces upon whom her eyes had ever rested. But by degrees the smiles and nods of Roger assured the child that he was a friend. Besides, had not it been his "speaking-stick" that had sent the terrible woods-cat to its death, just when it seemed that nothing could prevent it from springing on her guardian?

And so by slow degrees she even tried to talk with Roger, repeating after him the words he uttered. He would pick up his weapon, and say "gun" very distinctly; so in a little while, when he asked her what it was, she would say the word plainly, showing that the lesson had been learned.

And so it was with other things, even to his name, which proved pretty much of a stumbling-block; for words of two syllables were hard for the child to pronounce.

Meanwhile, as the evening passed, Dick from time to time tried to engage the squaw in conversation; but she was most uncommunicative, for some reason or other, and answered his questions either by shrugs that gave him to believe she did not understand, or else by single words.

But by dint of hard work he managed to get enough information from her to understand that she had been captured by a roving band of Shoshones, then, as nearly always, at war with the fighting Indians of the Northwest, the fierce Sioux, and, together with the child, who was related to her, carried away as captives to one of their villages, where they had been kept for months.

Finally a chance came to make her escape, though she would not go without Dove Eyes. They had stolen two horses, which had carried them many miles on their way toward the village of her people. Then trouble came, for her horse died of exhaustion, while that which the little girl rode broke a leg by stepping in a prairie dog hole.

After that they had gone afoot, existing as best they could on berries and such things as an Indian woman best knew would sustain life, until, without warning, they had been confronted by that hungry beast, which would surely have pounced upon them had not the paleface boys interfered.

Beyond that the squaw would not venture. Just who and what she was Dick could not ascertain, though once she did mention the fact that the child's father was a big chief among her people.

And when it came time for seeking rest, Roger willingly gave up his blanket in order that their visitors might be provided with some of the comforts to which their sex entitled them.

As was customary, the boys kept a wary eye out, though they had come to depend partly on

their horses to alarm them, should a creeping Indian come near the camp during the night. The animals seemed to fear the redskins as much as any lonely settler's wife might; and would snort, and pound their hoofs upon the ground, should they detect the presence of a marauder.

Perhaps towards morning both of the boys slept more soundly than usual, for they were tired, and sleep is more apt to overpower a watcher just before day comes on apace.

Roger was the first to get up. The earliest peep of dawn could be seen in the far east, through the trees, as he started to revive the little fire in the cavity, so that they might have an early breakfast, and move on. He found himself hoping that this day might see them once more looking out across the great river they had followed so far.

Having managed to get the blaze started, Roger turned to speak to his companion, to find that Dick was already on his feet, and looking around.

"Well, it happened just as I thought it would," Dick was saying.

"What do you mean?" demanded his companion, wonderingly.

"Look around, and tell me if you see our visitors," the other went on.

And Roger, turning his eyes in the quarter where the squaw and her charge had been lying, was astonished and dismayed to find that they had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PICTURE WRITING ON THE BARK

"WHY, they're gone!" the backwoods boy exclaimed, as he stared hard at the spot where he had supposed their visitors were still lying.

The blanket was there, carefully folded over a stick of wood, so as to give the impression at first glance that some one might be underneath, though Roger now saw that this could not be so.

"Yes, that's a fact," added Dick, just as if he meant to say that any one with eyes could see it.

"But, if you thought this would happen, why didn't we do something?" asked Roger.

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should we try to stop the old squaw if she thought it best to leave us in this way? She is naturally suspicious of all whites. And perhaps, for all we know, she might have thought we meant to take that little girl away to our people. So, just like an Indian, she

watched her chance, and while we slept crept out of camp. Let them go, Roger; even if we wanted to, we couldn't spare time to look for them now. We have to find that river to-day, you know."

"Yes, I think you're right, Dick," admitted the other, slowly, as he grasped the idea. "And anyhow, she didn't take my blanket. I ought to be thankful for that, I suppose. Indians are born thieves, they say. But see how she wrapped it about this piece of wood, just to make me think one of them might be lying under the folds. What's that lying on top of the blanket, Dick?"

"Looks to me like a piece of fresh bark," replied the other, as he stepped forward.

"Oh! it may be a message!" cried Roger, his eyes sparkling.

"Just what it is," answered his cousin. "See, she has drawn it in pictures, for you know that's the only way Indians can communicate their ideas to each other. Here is what she means to stand for our camp, with four of us sitting around a fire, two being men and the others women, for they have skirts. Then you can see the last two creeping away on their hands and knees. And here they come

into what I guess must be an Indian village."

"How easy to understand what she wants us to know," declared Roger, much struck by the manner in which the old squaw had left word that she and the little Indian girl were even then on their way to the village where they belonged.

"I thought something like this might happen," Dick said, presently, "when I saw the squaw hiding small pieces of meat last night, instead of eating them herself, hungry though she was. She meant to keep them for the child. A warrior, or an old squaw, may be able to go without a bite for days, but not a child."

Roger folded his blanket, and stowed it away, after which he went back to the little blaze he had started, saying in a humorous way:

"Well, anyhow we can have our meat cooked as we want it this morning, and not half burned in the Indian style; and that's worth something;" at which remark his comrade laughed.

"The chances are we'll never know just who old Karmeet was, or the pretty little dark-faced girl with her," Roger observed later,

while they were eating their frugal meal. "Dove Eyes, she said her name was; and perhaps it was all right, though I never yet saw a turtle-dove with such black eyes; did you, Dick?"

But Dick's mind was already wrestling with a weightier problem. He had to map out the day's march and figure on whether they would be apt to strike the river by still heading due north. Roger was already questioning in his mind whether they had not better turn somewhat toward the northeast, so as to make doubly sure; but as yet he had not dared speak his thought aloud.

But after all, it looked as though these things were ordered for the best. Supposing they had never left the bank of the Missouri, what would have been the fate of Karmeet and little Dove Eyes? Surely there must be some Power that regulated all such affairs; and even this wandering on their part had been for a purpose.

As they rode on that morning they gradually left the timber behind once more, and found it only in scattered *mottes*.

Roger was wavering in his belief, but Dick never allowed himself to doubt that, sooner

or later, they must come upon the river again, and possibly many miles above the spot where they had left it. He himself had been figuring it out, and reached the conclusion that there was a tremendous bend above the place of their turning aside to make a "cut-off;" and that, when they were able to again look upon the current of the river, they would have saved possibly a hundred miles of territory.

And should this prove to be the case Dick stood ready to thank his companion for being the cause of their wandering. What had promised to be a disaster might under such new conditions prove a blessing in disguise.

At noon they halted only long enough to take a cold bite. Indeed, this might as well have been done while on the move, only that the boys had compassion on their horses, and wished to give them a little rest in the middle of a hot day.

More than once Dick had raised himself in the stirrups as the afternoon wore on. Roger noticed this finally, and of course was curious to know why he did it.

"Do you think you see anything ahead there, Dick?" he demanded.

"I was noticing the formation of the land,"

came the calm reply; "and, Roger, unless I'm greatly mistaken, we're going to come on the river before the sun sets."

"I only hope you're a good prophet, Dick, that's all," the other quickly returned, as he, too, looked long and earnestly ahead. "And now that you've called my attention to it, I do believe it looks promising over there. Well, for one, I'm fish hungry, and I don't care who knows it. It seems like a terribly long time since I felt a fish tug at a line."

What Dick so confidently predicted came true.

Just one hour later they no longer had the slightest doubt about the river lying ahead, for there were many things that went to prove this fact. Roger gave himself up to picturing the success that was bound to follow his fishing operations; for, as has been remarked, the boy never was happier than when engaged in his favorite occupation.

"If we don't get there until about dark, Dick, promise me that you'll lay out our camp to-night close to the water, so that I can have my fill of fun without having to go far for it. Seems to me I don't want to lose sight of the water in a hurry again."

"I feel pretty much the same way as you do, Roger," replied the other, frankly. "And so I can safely promise you what you ask. We'll sleep to-night so near the water that it will make music to put us to sleep."

"The finest of music, too," ventured Roger; "especially after you've been silly enough to lose it for three nights running. But then I keep on hoping we may have gained something after all, which would make my blunder the easier to bear."

"I'm sure that it will turn out to be so," added generous Dick.

"And that we are right now closer to the exploring party than ever before; that would be just fine, eh, Dick?"

"It certainly would, Roger. There, if you look yonder, you can see the sun shining on what can be nothing else than running water."

"Yes, yes, that's what it must be, Dick; the river at last! I'll be glad to see our old friend again. Two months we've been following its course; until now we are so far away from our homes that it almost seems as if we might never get back there again. But it does look good to see the water again, and to know that

perhaps we'll even have a taste of fresh fish soon."

Even the horses seemed to know that the water was close by, for they acted as if given new life, pushing on with a vim that had been lacking during the earlier part of the day.

And so, about an hour before sundown, they came upon the Missouri once more, flowing peacefully between its wide banks, and at this season of the year rather low; so that here and there islands could be seen, as well as sandbars, on the latter of which flocks of birds sought their food.

"Now let's find a good spot where we can stay until morning; and it must be a fishing place, too," Roger remarked, as they turned their horses' heads up-stream.

Ten minutes later he suddenly called out:

"Look! how would that little island do, Dick? We can easily let the horses wade out, because it is hardly to their knees, I feel sure. And if you examine the lower part of the island you'll agree with me that it's just the finest place to let a baited hook float down-stream anybody ever could find. Please say yes, Dick!"

Roger was so urgent, and there seemed so

little chance of anything like disaster following the move, that even cautious Dick could not resist. And when they put the horses to it, they found that the water, as Roger had declared, was not more than a foot or so in depth, so that the passage was easily accomplished.

It was only a small island, with a few trees growing upon it, though even these showed signs of having been compelled to fight for existence when the spring freshets came along.

"We might as well make camp here at this lower end, eh, Dick?" asked Roger, who had an eye on the fishing possibilities, and was anxious to get busy.

Dick had been looking around, as usual, being desirous of getting the lay of the land fixed in his mind in case there should come any sudden necessity for a change of base during the night, when he would know what to do.

"Just as you say, Roger," he remarked. "If we are going to camp here, one place is about the same as another to me, so long as we keep our fire well hidden. And I can see where that can be easily done among these rocks back here. The horses we can tie to the

trees with their ropes, and there is enough grass to do for one night. So get busy as soon as you wish. I'll take care of everything else."

"Thank you, Dick; you feel for a fellow, don't you? But then you never were just as wild for fishing as I am. Oh! don't it seem good to be back once more close to our old friend, the river? And all night long I'm sure the splash of the water on the rocks will keep me sound asleep. It's the next thing to getting home again."

And in a short time Roger was attending to the several stout fish lines that he had baited, and thrown far out upon the passing current.

CHAPTER XXII

CAUGHT IN A RIVER TRAP

"HURRAH! I've got one already, Dick! See him pull, will you? Oh! this is worth waiting for, I tell you. And now, I wonder what kind it is, one of those slippery catfish, or the strongly built buffalo fish. Whoo! he nearly jerked the line out of my hands, then. But he's just got to come along. We want fish for supper, don't we, Dick?"

Calling out in this joyous strain Roger pulled his line in, hand over hand, until he finally landed his fish.

He did not stop work, but went at it again, baiting his hook eagerly, although that one capture ensured them all they wanted for a single meal. And Dick, as soon as he was through with the several little duties he had taken upon himself, started to clean the fish. Perhaps he, too, felt hungry for a change in diet, since one type of food is bound to become more or less monotonous.

The sun had set, and night began to draw near, as they started their small fire in the secluded spot where even Dick declared there was not a chance in the world for any passer-by to discover it.

He had seen no sign of an Indian village up or down the river, on either bank; but then, of course, since they had come down to get upon the island their range of vision was limited.

The supper was all that they had expected, and as the fish was fried to a turn in the pan, with some bear fat to keep it from sticking, both boys enjoyed their meal about as well as any they had eaten.

Afterwards Roger went back to his fishing, for he had not thus far been lucky enough to pull in a second captive; and the one they had eaten tasted so fine he was of a mind to repeat the programme for breakfast, if only he could coax another victim to take hold.

As for Dick, he lay thinking of the thousand-and-one things it was natural for a healthy boy to have passing through his mind. Going back, he could picture all the strange events that had happened to them ever since that day when they said good-by to the dear ones at home, and, with their boyish hearts seemingly

in their throats, urged their horses for the last time over the well-worn trail leading to the woods, where they had so often swung the axe, and felled the trees in order to clear the land for crops.

Finally, when after a long and tiresome siege of it, Roger succeeded in landing a duplicate of his first capture, the boy declared himself satisfied. So he put away his fish lines, and joined his companion.

"I don't exactly like the looks of the sky," Dick remarked. "It was yellow at sunset, instead of being red, as we like to see it."

"Does that mean rain?" asked Roger; though he knew it did, according to the way frontiersmen looked at the signs of the weather.

"Yes, and that was why I thought it just as well to put our blankets in under that ledge of rock. If the worst comes, we will have some kind of shelter."

"It was smart in you to think of that, Dick," declared the other; "but, then, I'm so used to having you do the right thing that I'd have been surprised if you let a chance go by for getting some sort of a roof over our heads."

But at the time they settled themselves down for the night, taking advantage of the rocky cover, no rain had fallen, and Roger expressed his hope that it might after all prove a false alarm.

Hours later the boys were awakened by a crash of thunder, and the first thing that greeted them when they sat up in their limited quarters was the sweep of the rising wind through the trees.

"It's coming, after all, Dick!" cried out Roger, in a disappointed tone.

"Looks like we might be in for it," replied the other.

"Can we do anything?" demanded Roger, eagerly.

"I'm going out to make sure the horses are fast before we have the rain pouring down on us," said Dick, starting to crawl from under the rocky roof.

"But, Dick, what if the river should rise, and cover this island; don't you think we'd better be getting ashore?" called out Roger.

"It's too late to try that now, for I can hear the rain coming down the river, and we'd be right in the worst of the storm. Stay where you are, Roger; I'll be back in a jiffy."

Dick may not have known just what a "jiffy" was, but he certainly made pretty quick time of it, after finding that the horses were standing under the cottonwood trees, with their tails toward the coming storm, as horses, and indeed all animals of their type, are wont to do.

"Whew! it's right on us; and such a roar as the wind and rain make, as they come rushing down the river," Dick said, as he crawled once more under the rocky roof, and joined his anxious companion.

"Anyhow, I'm glad we can swim," Roger remarked, showing that he was still thinking of a possible flood, and the fact that their position on the island placed them in a serious predicament in case the river rose rapidly, so as to cover the highest point, which was not many feet above the spot where they had camped.

There was really no time for further exchange of words. With a rush and a roar that were appalling, the storm burst upon them. They could hear the rain beating down in torrents, while the thunder crashed until the island seemed to shake under the heavy reverberations, and the lightning kept up a constant flashing that dazzled their eyes.

And yet there was a sort of fascination about the play of the storm that riveted their attention, so that they could not drag their eyes away, but, crouching there, continued to gaze, spell-bound.

Both boys thought more than once how fortunate it was that the rocky ledge under which they had found shelter for their bodies, as well as their few belongings, chanced to face in an opposite direction from that in which the storm was coming.

Had it been otherwise they must have been drenched to the skin; for the driving wind would have sent the heavy sheets of falling rain far under their cover.

They knew not what time of night it was, for not a star could be seen in that black sky.

"Will it ever stop?" shouted Roger, when there was finally a little lull in the wild racket — at least enough to admit of his voice reaching the ears of his comrade, close at hand.

"Yes, it's bound to," replied Dick, being wiser, for he placed his lips close to the ear of his cousin; "but already it seems to me the river is rising. I can surely hear the noise of it rushing along between us and the shore."

His words of course caused Roger more or less uneasiness, for he had himself been haunted latterly with visions of what a terrible thing it might prove for them if their escape should be cut off by morning, and the flood even threaten to wipe the island out of existence.

They could do nothing to better their condition, since it was now too late to think of trying to make the mainland. Their horses would prove unmanageable, with all that lightning to frighten them; and the chances were disaster must follow any attempt to ford the swollen stream before dawn came to show them just what perils they had to face.

That was surely a night never to be forgotten by the boys. And the longer it kept up, the greater grew their apprehension. Indeed, numbers of times Roger even loudly protested that he could feel the water coming into their shelter, though happily enough it proved every time that this was only some trickling rivulet, caused by a temporary shift of wind, and not an invasion by the encroaching river.

"Will daylight ever come?" he kept saying, time and again; for it was the utter darkness more than anything else that appalled

them, with the storm beating down steadily, and the river rising all the while.

There could be no doubt about this, for whenever the wind ceased for a brief interval, and the growling of the thunder died away, they heard that rushing sound, such as could only be made by great volumes of water speeding along.

Once Dick attempted to sally forth in order to learn just how matters stood, and whether the poor horses were enduring the downpour all right; but he did not get very far away, because another rush of rain caused him to dodge back to shelter.

Roger even dozed a little, being more or less accustomed to the noise by this time. But he was electrified to hear Dick suddenly call out:

"I really believe it's getting lighter, because I can see things out there that I couldn't a while ago."

"Yes, you're right, Dick!" exclaimed the other, as he thrust his head out; "and let me tell you, for one, I'm not sorry that day's coming. When there's anything wrong I like to see what I have to meet. This thing of being left in the dark gives me a cold shiver. See, it's getting lighter every minute. Oh! look at

the river, will you? It doesn't seem like the same one we fished in last night."

Nor did it, for the heavy rain must have fallen all along the stream, which was rising very fast, and was likely to continue to do so for several hours to come. A flood at this late summer day was doubtless a rare occurrence; but, then, the Missouri has always been known to do the least expected of things, so, with such a cloudburst to help along, even that was liable to happen.

"But thank goodness the rain seems to have stopped, even if the clouds are still hanging overhead," Roger declared, as he drew his stiffened figure from under the overhanging ledge, and tried to straighten up.

Then the two went, first of all, to see if the horses were there, and to their satisfaction found the poor beasts standing under a tree, as wet as they could possibly be, but apparently not otherwise harmed by the storm.

Afterwards they turned to survey the raging flood.

Between the island and the shore, where the horses had easily waded, there now rushed a torrent that must have been over their heads, and so fierce that even the hardiest swimmer

could never have held his own against its power.

"That's bad enough," admitted Roger; "but just see how the water is still creeping up on us. It looks to me as if the whole island would soon be covered!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RISING WATERS

"It *is* rising, Roger," admitted the older boy, seriously, as he surveyed the tumbling waters, rushing along with a noise like the churning of a score of grist mills, such as the one near the St. Louis settlement.

"Do you think it will keep on increasing all day, Dick?" asked the other, with a ring of alarm in his voice.

"It may," was the reply. "That will depend on how far up the river that heavy rainfall extended. If it covered the whole watershed, then the river here must keep on getting bigger for a good many hours before it reaches a crest."

"But we never knew the Missouri to rise at this late time in the summer, did we, Dick?"

"Not anything like this, that's sure, Roger. Of course, after a heavy storm it always

creeps up. But this is really a flood, and will bother the exploring expedition for a day or two, I think."

"Oh, but they have boats, and will think little or nothing of it, Dick," the younger boy went on. "But what a bad fix it finds us in! What if the water does keep on coming up and up all day; won't it cover this little island and perhaps wash it away?"

"Oh! hardly that," Dick hastened to answer. "It has stood many floods in the spring time, because these trees have had a chance to grow."

"But even if that rushing water only covers the island, where will we be then, I'd like to know? Ugh! it makes me shiver to think of it," and Roger turned to look once more at the roaring river.

"Of course I don't know where we'll be," Dick observed, calmly; "but if we've got the good sense I think we have, chances are two boys about our size will be perched in the branches of the largest tree on the island, with all their stores about them, waiting for the waters to go down again."

"Oh! and I never thought of that, either!" exclaimed Roger, apparently somewhat re-

lieved in his mind, as he noted that one of the trees was of some size.

"The worst thing about that plan," continued Dick, "is that we've got to lose our horses; and I hate to think of that more than I can tell you."

"Will they be drowned, do you think?"

"Well, horses can swim, you know; and they might get ashore if we turned them loose in good time. But even then, we'd never be able to track them; and our job of overtaking the expedition would be made all the harder. Still, we will not be the ones to give it up, Roger. Nothing could make us do that, could it?"

"No, indeed, it could not," replied the other boy, firmly. "But, Dick —"

"Yes, what idea has come into your mind now?" asked the other lad, encouragingly.

"Why, when you spoke of turning the horses loose, and letting them have a chance of reaching the shore, I thought what a fine thing it would be if we were holding on to the saddles at that time. Why, they'd just tow us to land with them, you see!"

"Yes, if they got there, which isn't a sure thing at all," replied Dick. "But we will de-

cide all that later on. Perhaps the river will rise only a little more, and then come to a stand-still. And, in case of the worst, we've always got that tree there. Even if it should be undermined by the flood, and carried away, we might stick in the branches."

"And float down the river, you mean," added Roger. "That would save our lives, of course; but think how we'd feel, going away from Captain Lewis mile after mile. Why, this makes me think of what our fathers told us about that flood up along the Ohio, that was the cause of their coming further West."[1]

"That's a fact, it does; and they came near being drowned in that same flood, too, didn't they?" said Dick. "But let's begin to get our packages ready, in case we have to climb this tree. It's just as well to be prepared, even if we never have to carry out that plan."

"But you really think we will have to, don't you, Dick?" persisted the other.

"If the water gets high enough to cover our island, yes," was the reply; "because there's really no other way. But these summer floods come and go quickly. It isn't like the early spring time, when the ground is frozen, and

[1] See "Pioneer Boys of the Mississippi."

the downpour can find no way to soak into it, so that it all rushes off."

Dick was a good fellow to have along on an occasion of this kind. He always managed to appear cheerful, no matter how seriously the conditions affected him; and besides this, he was so very fertile in resource. Seldom did there arise a sudden emergency but that Dick proved himself capable of suggesting an immediate remedy. In this particular he resembled his father, Bob Armstrong, who, in the old days on the Ohio, used to be looked up to by his younger brother, Sandy, on this account.

It was far from cheerful work, however, standing there keeping track of the gradual rise of the river. And it lacked the interest that they might have found in the task had they been at home, and only curious to know what height the water would reach before starting to as speedily decline.

Now they had everything at stake; and it meant great peril to them if the little island should be completely submerged.

Roger had constructed a contrivance whereby they were able to know just how fast the water rose. This was a stick which he had marked off in inches, and driven into

the ground at the edge of the river. By consulting it every little while they were enabled to learn the truth, and it was a continued disappointment.

"It looks as if we'd have to climb, sooner or later, Dick," declared Roger, when several hours had passed, and they had three times been forced to retreat before the advance of the flood, removing their "tally stick" on each occasion.

"I'm sorry to say it's getting that way," replied the other, shaking his head.

"But what about the horses?" demanded Roger.

"Well, we've got them here by the tree, and when we have to mount up among the branches we can turn them loose," answered his cousin.

"But, Dick, if they have to go, poor things, why make it harder for them?"

"I see what you mean, Roger; you think we ought to cut the ropes now, and let them swim for the shore. It does you credit, too; but I hardly believe it would work."

"Why wouldn't it?" asked Roger.

"For this reason," came the reply. "Horses are affectionate. They get accus-

tomed to people, and these ones know us well, because we've raised them from colts. Now, the chances are that, if we turned them loose at this minute, they would refuse to leave us until the water forced them to swim. Even if you pushed one off the island, I feel sure he would try hard to get back again. So what's the use of turning them loose now? "

"Perhaps that's so," admitted Roger. "I was only thinking of giving the poor beasts a better chance to get ashore; because the higher the water rises the harder it will be for them to swim."

After that they stood watching and waiting; but with only the most dismal forebodings as to what was to come. And indeed it was anything but pleasant to think of being made prisoners in a tree that would be completely surrounded by a raging flood, perhaps for another night and day. And then the loss of their horses was going to make their task of overtaking the expedition all the harder.

So the morning passed, and while on several occasions Roger indulged in new hopes that the water had come to a stand at last, these were only fated to be dashed to the ground on his next anxious inspection of his "tally

stick," when he learned that the flood was actually making up for lost time.

"How much longer will we have, Dick?" he asked, when, for the third time, he had made this unpleasant discovery.

"At the rate it seems to be crawling up our stake, it will only be two hours until the water will be at the foot of this tree," replied the other, who had already figured all this out.

"Two hours isn't much time, is it, Dick?"

"Well," replied the other, with a smile, "that all depends on the conditions. You can look back to lots of times when it would seem like an eternity. Remember that night when you slipped and fell over that precipice, just managing to get hold of a bush, and holding on while you shouted for me to come and help you up, because you couldn't do anything yourself? If you'd had to hang there, kicking your heels in space, two hours, instead of ten minutes, I think they'd have seemed the longest you ever knew."

"That's so," admitted Roger, smiling a little himself at the scene which his comrade's words recalled. "And just as you say, Dick, we have been through a good many hard scrapes together, haven't we; and always, up

to now, managed to come out on top? Perhaps we'll do the same this time, too."

"Why, to be sure we will," declared the other, stoutly, "don't let any other notion get hold of you, Roger. It's all bound to come out right; haven't we been told that many times by our mothers, when things looked a little black — and didn't the sky clear every time? We'll escape from this island, overtake the expedition, get that paper signed by Jasper Williams, and bring joy to all our dear ones at home. Why, I'm just as sure of that, Roger, as that we're standing here right now, wondering how we're going to get ashore. But a way will be provided, mark my words."

Never was a prophecy more speedily fulfilled. Hardly had five minutes passed than Roger clutched the sleeve of his cousin's tunic, and in a voice that trembled with emotion, burst out:

"Look! oh! look, Dick, are my eyes going back on me — is this one of those mirages they told us we would meet with on the prairies; or is that really a boat — yes, two, *three* of them — down at the bend below, and working up against even all this fierce current? Three boats, Dick — wasn't that what Captain Lewis

had with him when he started away from St. Louis? Oh! speak and tell me if I am going out of my mind, and seeing things that I've been dreaming about so long!"

Dick laughed, and hugged his cousin with rapture.

"No, no, Roger, your eyes are all right, and the boats are there!" he cried. "We've only managed to get *ahead* of the expedition, that's all. And we'll be saved now, Roger! We've won out at last!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT

After that neither of the boys could utter a word for a time. They just stood there, trembling with emotion, and staring at the moving figures down the river.

Then, as if by agreement, they turned and faced each other. Dick thrust out his hand impulsively, and it was instantly seized by his cousin. Indeed, Roger looked as though he could hardly restrain himself from throwing his arms about the neck of his companion, so greatly was he overcome; but probably the conviction that such an act, however natural, would seem weak and childish, restrained him. Boys in those days had so much responsibility placed upon their young shoulders that they had to call themselves men long before they reached the age of twenty-one.

By degrees they became somewhat calmer, and could even speak once more without betraying their emotion.

"They're making headway against even that powerful current, don't you see, Dick?" was what Roger remarked, as though something in the occurrence pleased him.

"Yes, it would have to be greater difficulties than that to keep those determined men from pushing forward," observed Dick, in turn. "They have overcome everything that has cropped up to try and discourage them, up to now. And with such a leader as Captain Lewis, they are bound to cross all the way to the ocean."

"But don't you see that, if they can breast that current, they will be able to get us off this island trap?" continued Roger.

"I'm sure of that," answered the other; "and now, Roger, let's signal to them, for as yet they don't seem to have noticed us standing here."

"Then they're due for the greatest surprise of the whole trip," chuckled Roger. "It must be the last thing they'd ever think to see, a couple of white boys further up the river than they've come after all these months. Say when you're ready, Dick, and we'll call out hello!"

"Let it be now, then," replied his comrade.

Together they sent out lusty hails, forming their hands into cups that would answer the purpose of a megaphone, though neither Roger nor Dick had ever seen such a thing, since it was utterly unknown at that day.

And indeed, when the sound of their voices reached the plucky explorers, there seemed to ensue something like a small panic.

Some of the men were seen to jump for their firearms, doubtless under the impression that they were about to be attacked by a strolling band of the fierce Sioux, always striving to be the lords of the northwest prairies.

Then they apparently discovered that the two on the little island amidst the swirling waters of the flood were white boys, and that they were beckoning wildly, as though trying to let the exploring party know they needed help.

After that some of the men hurried up the shore so as to sooner reach a point opposite the island. Among them the prisoners of the flood recognized the figure of Captain Lewis, himself; for they had seen him talking to others in St. Louis early in the spring, before the expedition started.

"Who are you, and how did you come

there?" demanded the leader of the party, also using his hands in order to make his voice carry above the roar of the current.

"We come from St. Louis, and have been trying to overtake you!" replied Dick.

"I hope it is nothing serious; do you come with a message for me from the President? I trust he has not seen fit to recall the expedition, and abandon the plan for exploring the Great Northwest country?" the captain shouted next, doubtless a prey to many anxieties.

"No," called out the boy; "we are only up here on private business connected with one who is among your number. We lost the river, and wandered several days; but, when we struck it again at this point, we must have gained enough to place us ahead. We have horses, and camped on this island when the water was low; but the storm came and trapped us. Do you think you can get us off, Captain Lewis?"

"Without a doubt we can," the other answered, heartily, "and will very shortly, when the boats get up this far. Have no anxiety on that score, friends. But you seem to be only

boys; is it possible that two such youths could make this long journey, and escape all the perils that lie in wait for white travelers in this region?"

"We have been very fortunate," was Dick's modest reply.

"Ah! you have been more than fortunate!" cried Captain Lewis, admiration in his tones; "and I shall be very proud to take you both by the hand. It is wonderful how you pioneer boys are built; nothing seems to daunt you. No wonder that some of the men with me are so ready to accept any hazards, when they spring from such stock as that. Have patience, lads, and we will soon be able to reach you."

Neither of the boys had any longer the slightest doubt that their rescue was as good as accomplished. When such dauntless men set about doing anything they would not let difficulties stand in the way.

So, standing there, they watched with considerable interest as the boats were forced against that apparently resistless current of the swollen Missouri. At times stout poles were resorted to; and, when a particularly bad bend was to be negotiated, ropes came into

play in order to warp the craft around the point where the water flowed swiftest.

In this fashion they would be able to make quite a number of miles during the course of a day, and every one counted as so much gained.

When finally the entire expedition had reached a point opposite to the island, they came to a halt, and preparations for the release of the prisoners were instituted.

A giant, carrying the end of a rope, plunged recklessly into the river above the upper end of the island, and battled with the current. He was of course swept down the stream, in spite of his sturdy efforts, but it appeared that he had calculated well, for he reached the shore of the island, and was able to crawl up the bank.

Then the rope was fastened to a tree, and those on the mainland drew it taut, so that it only dipped in the center into the water.

Under the directions of this experienced frontiersman, who turned out to be one of the Kentuckians forming a part of the expedition, the horses were one after the other started for the shore. A traveling ring on the rope was used to secure their stout rope bridles, and, once they were forced to plunge into the water,

and kept from returning to the island, the intelligent animals seemed to understand what was required of them, and struck out for the mainland.

The rope served to keep them from being swept down-stream, so that in the end they emerged from the water, and shook themselves like dogs.

Meanwhile the boys had prepared for the passage, taking off a part of their garments, and making them into compact bundles, that were to be carried with their other few possessions remaining; for most of them had been attached to the horses, and were already safe ashore, awaiting their coming.

Dick insisted on going first, for he wanted Roger to observe what he meant to do, so that the more impetuous boy might pattern by his example. But Roger came close behind, since the rope was amply able to bear a double strain.

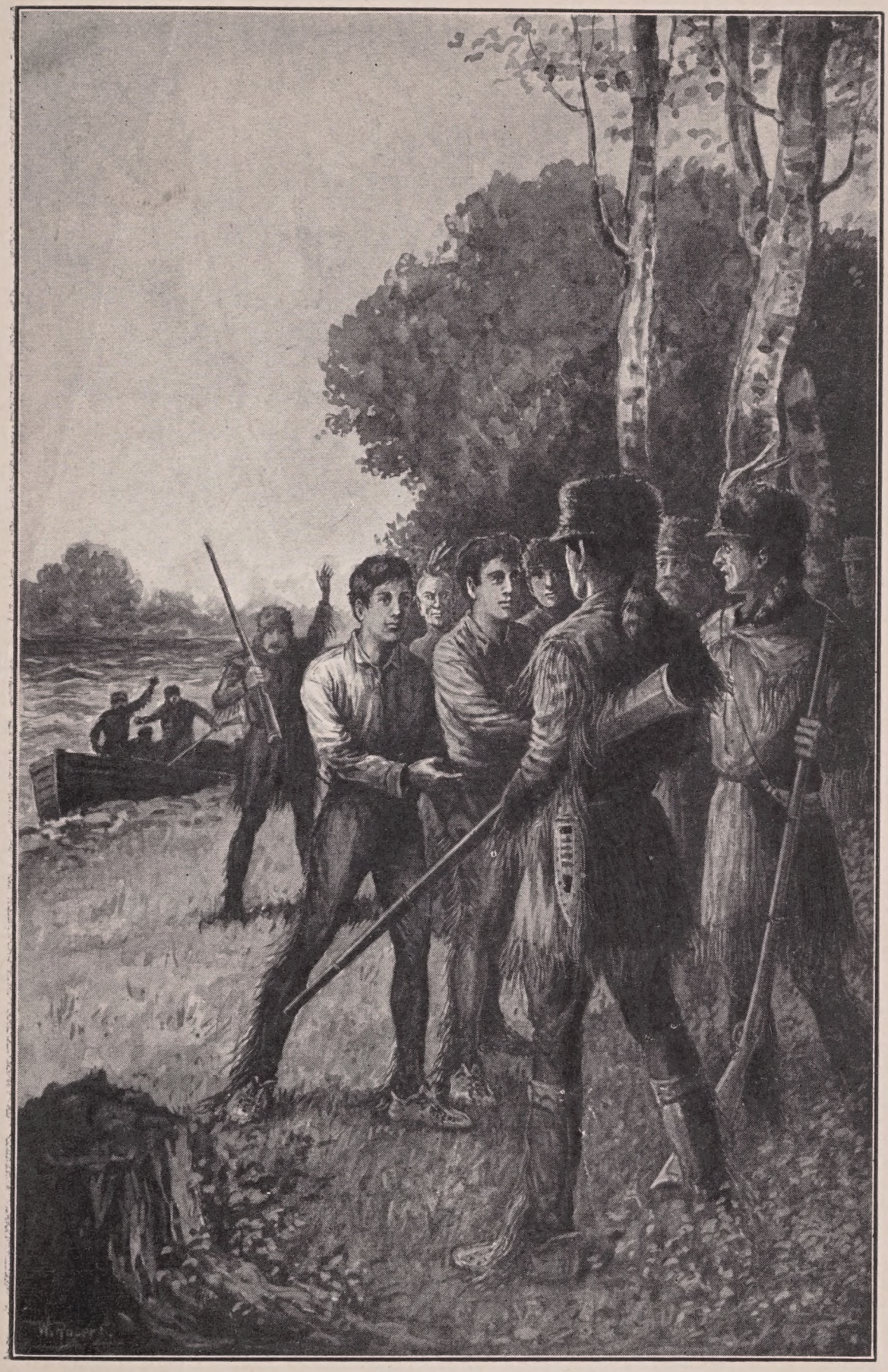
For a short time it was pretty exciting work, since the current was swift, and seemed to tear at them, as though determined not to be cheated out of its prey. But the boys had no difficulty in keeping hold of the rope, and thus hitching themselves along, a foot at a time.

Once past the middle of that portion of the river lying between the island and the shore, the worst was over; and every rod gained now meant an easier time, so that presently eager hands were outstretched to help them up the bank.

A shout that might have been heard far away attested the deep interest soldiers and frontiersmen had taken in the rescue. Every man came crowding up to squeeze the hands of the two lads, and declare that he was proud to welcome them to the ranks of the expedition. After all these weary weeks of battling with the current of the great river, and meeting every imaginable kind of danger and difficulty, it was like a breath from home to thus come upon two valiant young fellows, away up here in the land of the fighting Sioux.

It seemed almost incredible to think of mere boys capable of accomplishing such a task. No wonder both Captain Lewis and Captain Clark, his capable fellow commander, were pleased to welcome Dick and Roger.

"It seems to me I have seen you both before," remarked the former. "It must have been in the settlement of St. Louis, while we were arranging the details of our long trip,



"CAPTAIN LEWIS AND CAPTAIN CLARK . . . WERE PLEASED TO WELCOME DICK AND ROGER."

and waiting for some of the men to arrive."

"Yes," replied Dick, "it was there, and you met our fathers, the Armstrong brothers, sons of old David Armstrong, who came from Virginia, settled on the Ohio, and finally made his way down the river to the Mississippi, acting under the advice of Daniel Boone, who was his life-long friend."

"Now I remember you," responded Captain Lewis. "Which one of you caught my runaway horse before he got fairly started? It was a quick action; and I believe I thanked whoever it was on the spot, and shook hands with the lad."

"That was Roger, here, Captain Lewis!" declared Dick quickly, only too glad of the opportunity to bring his cousin into the light.

"But both of you are shivering with the cold, after getting wet," remarked the soldier captain, William Clark. "See, some of my men have started fires, for we intend to cook our noonday meal at this spot. Go over there and keep warm, while some of us dry your garments. This has been the happiest event of the whole trip. Only it was a little unwise for you to camp on that island, when a storm

threatened. The Missouri is a freakish stream, and you have to watch it closely, or it will catch you napping some time.''

"That was all my fault, Captain,'' admitted Roger, frankly. "I am wild for fishing, and begged my cousin to cross over and camp there, so that I could watch my lines close to our little cooking fire. And while he gave in to me, I could see that it was really against his better judgment. But we were the luckiest fellows going to get out of the trap so easily. And we are happy to know that, after our long chase, we have caught up with you at last.''

Neither of the boys had as yet ventured to say anything regarding the nature of their mission. That would come later, when they found a better opportunity to chat with the genial leaders. And the advice given by the soldier was worth following, because, of a truth, they were both shivering with the coolness of the air after the storm, since the few garments they had on were thoroughly soaked.

It was a bustling scene that the boys looked on as they sat close to the fire, drying their clothes. How different things would be now, when they no longer had any reason to hide

their fire. A force of twenty-one regular soldiers, as well as an equal number of young Kentuckians and frontiersmen, who acted as scouts and hunters, in order to supply fresh meat to the expedition, had little fear of the Indians.

Besides, their boats were arranged to be of more or less value to them as places of refuge in case of an attack, one of them being covered over, and capable of serving as no mean fortress, from behind whose walls they could pour their fire into the lines of any attacking force.

By the time a hot dinner had been cooked the boys were once more feeling comfortable, since their garments were all well dried. They sat down with the two comrades, as their especial guests, and it became apparent that Captain Lewis in particular had been much taken with both Dick and Roger.

As they ate and talked Captain Lewis finally introduced the subject that had been puzzling him so long.

"Would you mind telling us what caused you to take this daring journey, my lads?" he asked, with a kindly smile.

"An enemy of our fathers," Dick went on

to explain, " one François Lascelles, has managed in some way to secure a hold upon the property which was secured by our grandfather from the original French settlers above St. Louis, and threatens to take it away from them. His claim is undoubtedly a false one; but, unless we can secure the signature of a certain party to a paper we carry, it is certain that the entire valuable tract of land will be taken from our parents by spring, at the latest. Too late, it was learned that this man had agreed to join your force somewhere on the way. We started out after you had been gone for weeks; but, as we had good horses, and you had your boats to force up the river, we gradually came up on you, until now we have arrived."

" Have you seen the one you are seeking among the men here? " asked the commander.

" We do not know him by sight, but his name is Jasper Williams," replied Roger.

The face of Captain Lewis clouded.

" I am indeed sorry to hear that," he said; " because only two days ago I sent Jasper Williams, whom I count as my best scout, to go on ahead, and make friends with the Mandan Indians, whose hunting grounds we will be ap-

proaching in a few weeks, and with whom I may determine to remain all winter. So that you will have to keep on with us until we can come up on him once more! ''

CHAPTER XXV

THE VILLAGE OF THE MANDANS

"THAT'S a bitter disappointment, Captain Lewis," declared Dick, when he could speak clearly, after gulping down the lump that arose in his throat.

"Yes, I can well understand that it must seem so, after all the adventures and hardships you have met with in order to overtake us," replied the genial leader of the exploring party; "but, then, what is to hinder you from accompanying us as far as the Mandan country, where we will undoubtedly come upon Williams again, and you can induce him to affix his signature to the document? Indeed, both Captain Clark and myself will only too gladly witness it, if that would please you."

Dick looked at Roger, and the latter smiled, although a moment before he had felt the bitter tears of disappointment welling into his eyes.

"It is the only thing we can do, Roger!"

"And, after all, what could be nicer, since

it will give us a chance to be in the company of Captains Lewis and Clark for many days," the other rejoined, as though he had seen the sun gleam through the rain clouds.

"And," the commander continued, encouragingly, "after we have decided where we shall spend the winter, somewhere near the Mandan village, so as to undertake the scaling of the mountains when spring comes again, we may be sending a couple of scouts back down the river with a message to the President, to inform him of what success we have met with thus far, since he will be anxious to know. If you choose, you can accompany that party; or, if you would rather remain with us, entrust one of them — a reliable man he shall be — with your valuable document, to be delivered, on my word of honor, to your grandfather on their reaching St. Louis."

"Oh!"

That was all Roger said, but the light that flashed across his eager, boyish face baffled description. What Captain Lewis had just said amounted to an invitation to join the exploring force, and be a member of the expedition that was bound to go down in history as famous.

And perhaps quiet, sober Dick experienced some of the same enthusiasm, although he was better able to restrain his feelings. The prospect of being in the company of these hardy souls for days, and perhaps weeks, was a pleasant one; and, if that pleasure were extended to the entire winter and following summer, it would be the greatest event of their lives.

Dick realized that, having said as much as he had, it was only right that he should go into more details concerning the scheme of the French trader to legally cheat them out of their homes.

Accordingly, he told all that he knew about it, both of the commanders listening with considerable interest, and expressing their sympathy with the settlers.

"I have heard of this Lascelles," remarked Captain Lewis, "and nothing to his credit, either. He is certainly a rascal. It is a pity the law cannot reach such as he; but his cunning always keeps him from putting his neck in the rope. But some fine day he is certain to meet his fate at the hands of some furious frontiersman whom he has cheated. I understand that, years ago, he used to be a trapper,

and by degrees changed into a buyer of pelts, and a rich trader."

"I have met him many times," said Captain Clark, "and never liked the man. He is one of those blustering bullies, who believes he can frighten others by a black frown, and hard words."

When the expedition once more started, the boys were looked upon as members of the party. They had a most delightful afternoon, vastly different from the distress and gloom of the earlier part of the day.

All that was done they watched with considerable interest, learning how these expert French Canadian watermen managed, in order to cope with the swift current of the river at its worst stage.

It was agreed by all that the flood would subside almost as quickly as it had come, and that inside of two days the river would probably be at about the same level as before. Still, as it kept on rising for the balance of the afternoon, Dick was of the opinion that the island must have been fully covered, which, had they remained there, would have necessitated their climbing the tree, in order to keep from being swept away.

They were bubbling over with delight at their improved prospects.

"I'll always believe in that old saying about its being 'darkest just before dawn,'" Roger remarked, as they rode on ahead of the rest of the party, though there were always a few scouts far in the van to look for signs of hostile Indians, who might be trying to lay some sort of ambush, with the design of sending a shower of arrows among the whites.

"Who are these Mandan Indians the captain was telling us about, Dick?" asked the younger boy, while they rode together late in the afternoon, with a fair sky overhead, and a brisk breeze blowing that seemed to hint of the autumn season not so far away.

"I've heard some talk about them," replied Dick; "and people say they are different from all the other tribes up here. Some call them the white Indians, because they seem to be less of a coppery hue than the rest. And they have many queer customs, which we may see for ourselves — if we have to stick by the expedition that long, at least." (Note 5.)

"'At least!'" echoed Roger, meaningly; "that sounds as if you might be thinking of accepting Captain Lewis's invitation to be-

come members of the expedition, and go all the way with him to the Western ocean.''

Dick sighed.

"Sometimes I am tempted to say I'd like nothing better, if we could be positive that the paper, that is going to save our parents' homes, was sure of reaching the hands of Grandfather Armstrong. Then again, a longing to see my mother and father and Sam will grip me, and shake that temptation off.''

"It is the same with me, Dick; and, yet, just think what a glorious chance we have to see wonderful things. It will never come to us again; and perhaps our parents would think we were foolish not to take advantage of it now. Of course I never would dream of such a thing, if we couldn't get that paper home to them; but Captain Lewis assured us it would go just as safely with his messengers as though we carried it ourselves.''

"Yes, that's so, Roger; and we'll talk it over,'' Dick went on hastily. "Surely we shall have plenty of time for that as the days pass by. And, if we can see our way clear to do it honorably, without feeling that we are wrong, perhaps — ''

"You will say stay?" exclaimed the other, joyfully.

"Wait and see," was the only satisfaction Dick would give his impetuous companion; but Roger knew that the seed had been planted, and he had reason to believe it must germinate in good season, if all went well.

Then came the camp, as evening approached.

How different it all was to what they had been used to doing. There was apparently no reason for concealment. The fires blazed brightly and cheerfully, and the preparations for cooking the evening meal were gone about in a manner quite the opposite to what they had become accustomed to; the men laughing and chatting as they hovered around the several fires, while sentries, posted by Captain Clark to ensure against any surprise, stood their posts, grim and faithful.

One of the voyageurs, a man named Fields, seemed to be particularly interested in the two lads, and they learned the reason why when they came to chat with him later in the evening, sitting beside a fire.

"I knew Pat O'Mara," he told them, "and often heard him tell about your fathers, who

were to him Bob and Sandy Armstrong. I also knew Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton in the days gone by, for I have roamed over all the country between the Great Lakes and Kentucky. And it pleases me to think that I've run across the sons of those pioneers who came down the Ohio River when its banks were lined with savage Shawanees, Delawares and other red foes, waiting for a chance to surprise settlers, and lift their scalps."

Fields, whose name will be found written on the scroll of fame as a member of that wonderful little party, was a man of more than ordinary intelligence, and both Dick and Roger came to be very fond of him in the long days that followed, as they continued to press on, always into the northwest, with the river gradually becoming smaller the farther they advanced toward its unknown source.

The two Armstrong boys were not willing to simply act as guests, and accept favors. They wanted to do their part toward supplying the expedition with fresh meat while in company with those who had been so kind to them.

So from time to time they went out, generally in the company of some older hunter,

like Fields, to look for buffalo, elk, antelope or any other kind of game. And, as had usually been the case in their hunts, the boys were lucky in finding plenty of game; so that before long they began to be looked on as the main source of fresh meat supply for the camp.

They met with more or less adventure while engaged in this work; but nothing of a really serious nature came along. Nor were they so unfortunate as to run across hostile Indians, though constantly warned to keep a sharp lookout for signs of the treacherous Sioux, who were feared more than any of the other tribes along the upper reaches of the "Big Muddy," as the Missouri came to be called even in those early days, on account of the condition of its turgid waters.

Another thing Dick and Roger bore in mind, and this was the possible presence of the French trader, François Lascelles, and his son Alexis in the neighborhood. Not a thing had they heard concerning this pair since leaving St. Louis, and secretly Dick was hoping that they had been turned back by the innumerable obstacles they must have met with soon after starting.

It was only natural that, finding themselves in the company of such men as Fields, who were wrapped up heart and soul in the determination of the expedition to cross the mighty mountain chain that was known to stand as a barrier between the plains and the far distant Western sea, the boys should become daily more and more deeply interested in the enterprise.

By degrees even the stern resolution of Dick to let nothing tempt him to delay his return to the mother whom he missed so much, was weakening; and it seemed probable that in the end he would be ready to accede to Roger's eager plea that they cast their fortunes in with the others, on condition that the signed document could be surely carried to Grandfather Armstrong by a trusty messenger.

As they ascended higher up the river, and it became clearer, the fishing became greatly improved. Often of an evening, when waiting for supper to be announced, Roger would indulge to his heart's content in his favorite sport; so that many a time he was able to supply fish for the whole camp.

There were other ways in which the two lads proved that they were hunters with a good

knowledge of the habits of game. When the river ran through great sections of wooded country, as frequently happened, they would take a dugout canoe, and, after dark had set in, push further up-stream, keeping close to the shore, and carrying a lighted torch in the bow.

In this way they frequently sighted deer that were feeding in the water, possibly making a meal from certain lily pads they fancied. Startled by the sudden glow of the wonderful fire, they would often stand there, staring as though unable to understand what it all meant, until the keen eyes of those in the boat sighted them, when a well-aimed arrow would very likely provide the camp with another abundant supply of food.

Once the boys came unexpectedly on a buffalo bull also standing knee-deep in the river, drinking his fill, or cooling off after a warm day. And Roger, being quick to act, had fired his feathered barb almost before Dick could warn him to be careful. The result was that the wounded beast charged the boat, and upset it, so that the boys were given wet jackets, and might have even suffered the loss of their long-barreled guns only that they had the good

sense to keep a tight grip on these as they floundered in the water.

The enraged and wounded buffalo was ready to attack them again, and so Dick, in order to settle the matter in their favor, was compelled to make use of his rifle, shooting the bull at close quarters, just as he was rushing toward the spot where Roger was splashing in his endeavor to keep his head above the surface.

It can be understood that after such an experience Roger was apt to stay his hand whenever it happened that they discovered a buffalo in the river; since another time they might not chance to be so fortunate.

So the days passed, and the pioneer boys were enjoying themselves vastly; but the time came when the peaceful scene was suddenly changed. There seemed to be a commotion ahead, and the boys, who had been riding in the rear, galloped up in order to learn what it all meant.

Some of the scouts had come in to announce that they were now drawing close to the Mandan village, where Captain Lewis was thinking of settling down for the autumn and winter, if the signs were favorable. This meant, if he

could make the chief a good friend by the bestowal of presents, such as looking-glasses, beads, knives, and other things kept in stock for this very purpose.

"To-morrow, they say, we ought to be there," Roger told Dick, as they rode on.

"Yes, and oh! how I hope that we will find Jasper Williams waiting for the expedition to arrive," returned Dick, with considerable emotion; for the longer this meeting was delayed, the more it began to get upon their nerves.

"Well," remarked Roger, turning philosopher for once, "we've been so lucky up to now that I don't see how we could miss getting his signature to that paper. He must be in the Mandan village; and by to-morrow night we may have had the two captains witness the signing of his name, that will mean so much to all at home."

"You're right, Roger, and I believe the same, deep in my heart," Dick went on. "And, even if he should be away when we get to the Mandan village, it can only be for a short time. We will find him, believe that, if we have to go out after him."

All that evening they were rather silent.

The near approach of the crisis in their affairs rather appalled the lads. They had anticipated this thing for so long a time, that the coming of the fateful hour, when all must be put to the test, rather unnerved them.

Little sleep visited their eyes that night, for Captain Lewis had informed them that some time on the morrow they would reach the Mandan village. He had received a message from Williams, reporting that the great chief of the Mandans was disposed to be friendly, and was sending a token of amity in the shape of presents, being handsome robes, decorated after the Indian custom, and very valuable.

With the coming of the dawn the expedition again commenced its forward move. As the river flowed smoothly all through this region they were able to make rapid progress throughout the morning, and most of the afternoon.

About three o'clock they came to the great Mandan village, situated among the trees in a place where the country was rolling. Long before they arrived they knew they were drawing near the place, from the uproar that greeted their ears — the beating of tomtoms, barking of dogs, neighing of horses, and all

manner of sounds that would indicate unusual excitement.

Then a large band of warriors came out to greet them, with orders that the white men should be given all honors as the guests of the chief. Thus those on the three boats, as well as that part of the expedition ashore, were escorted to the village, amid a great clamor. But it was to be noticed that the soldiers kept close together, and had their guns always in a condition for immediate use, to impress the Indians with their ability to defend themselves.

But the Mandans were evidently disposed to be friendly. They lacked the fierce disposition of the Sioux, with whom they were constantly at war, though they could fight, and bravely too, when they had to.

Once in the Indian village, the boys saw a thousand things of interest around them; for this was the first opportunity they ever had had to roam about among the lodges of a large Indian camp. But they were in a fever of suspense concerning Jasper Williams; for surely the scout would have shown himself at their approach, had he been there.

Captain Lewis, knowing the anxious state of

their minds, had promised to ask the chief concerning the scout in his first interview; and they hung around the wigwam which, by its gay markings, they knew must be the council chamber, and into which both the captains had been led half an hour before.

"Here he comes!" announced Roger, finally, in a gleeful tone.

Dick did not answer, for he could see that Captain Lewis looked serious, as though he had rather disappointing news for them; and his heart seemed to almost cease beating for a brief interval as the leader of the explorers advanced toward the spot where he and Roger stood awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXVI

STRANGE SIGHTS

"DICK, he looks as if he was bringing us bad news!" exclaimed Roger, quickly. "Oh! I hope nothing has happened to Jasper Williams! What if he should be dead! All our long journey would be for nothing; and we would not be able to save the homestead property after all."

"Hold on," said Dick, laying a hand on his cousin's arm. "I hardly think it can be as bad as that. At the worst I think we'll learn that he has gone out again to scout around. They say he can't keep quiet for an hour; I guess he's built on the same plan as you are, Roger. But here's the captain."

"Too bad, my lads," observed Captain Lewis, as he came up to them; "but your patience will have to hold out a few more days, it seems."

"Jasper Williams — is he away, then?" asked Roger.

"Yes," answered the commander, "he did not expect us to get up here so soon, it seems; and, only three days ago, started out on another wide detour, to find what the hostile Sioux were doing; for we've had more or less trouble with them at times. He may not be back for a week or so."

"Of course we're disappointed," said Dick, bravely hiding his chagrin, "but I guess we'll have to stand it, and wait for him to come in."

"There may be some way of reaching him and letting him know that we are here in the Mandan village, where we have met with a warm welcome," the captain went on.

"In what way, may I ask, sir?" questioned Dick, eagerly.

"I understand that Williams left word with our friend, the Mandan chief here, that he would swing around in a few days to a certain salt-lick; and that, if the other wished to send him out any word, he could have a brave meet him there."

"Oh! perhaps we might go with that messenger!" exclaimed Roger, immediately.

"It might be so arranged, I suppose," the captain observed, smiling at the eagerness exhibited by the boy, which he could easily un-

derstand. These lads had quite won his heart in the days they had spent with the explorers.

"When would he be going out to find Jasper Williams?" asked Dick, himself just as anxious as Roger, to hasten the meeting with the man who held the fate of their homes in his hand.

"Some time to-morrow, the chief promised me," came the reply.

"And is this salt-lick far away from here?" continued Dick; not that he and his cousin were anxious to set eyes on it, except that it marked the meeting-place with the scout, for they knew what a salt-lick was like, and had often heard their fathers tell of the wild animals they used to shoot, far back in Kentucky and Ohio, when they came to partake of the much-prized salt to be found at one of these places. (Note 6.)

"Not more than a day's journey, I understand, so that you could easily get to it before night, if you started early," Captain Lewis went on. "We will in all probability remain where we are for a long time, perhaps throughout the winter, so that all these matters can be easily arranged; only I appreciate how anxious you must be to find Williams. Please

yourselves, my lads; I am ready to do almost anything for you."

"And we can never forget that, sir," replied Roger, as he gave the other a look of affection; for, during the time they had been in the society of Captain Meriwether Lewis, they had come to admire him more than almost any man they had ever met.

While they continued to wander around the great Mandan village, and observe the many strange things to be seen there, they felt a sort of impatience for the morrow to come, in order that they might hunt for Jasper Williams.

The warriors had taken their cue from the friendly attitude of their chief, and were disposed to welcome the palefaces who had come from the far distant Land of the Rising Sun.

As for the squaws and younger element, they followed the boys around wherever they went, observing their guns, their clothes, and even their powder-horns, with the deepest interest, as though they had never before set eyes on such wonders.

Several of the boldest Indian lads were disposed to be friendly, and make advances, though they knew not a word of English; but then, signs can go a great way, especially

among youngsters, and it was not long before both pioneer boys felt as if they had made good friends of these dark-faced Mandans. The bestowal of a few little trinkets, with which they had provided themselves, caused the most remarkable exhibition of interest. After that the crowds following them grew larger than ever.

Hearing that the wonderful medicine-man of the tribe had been chasing away the Evil Spirit that was making a fever come upon a sick man, the white boys expressed a desire to see him, and, when their new friends understood this, they led the way to his lodge, which was apart from all the others.

Here he came, after a bit, the queerest figure either of the white boys had ever seen in all their lives. (Note 7.)

He paused long enough to gravely extend a skinny hand to each of the boys, and utter the one word he knew of English, just as Indians of to-day repeat it:

"How?"

Then, as if not wishing to remain on exhibition longer, he shook himself so that the little shells, rattlesnake rattles, dried gourds filled with pebbles, and other articles attached

to his person gave forth every variety of quaint sound, and vanished within his teepee.

The boys could hardly keep from laughing aloud, the old magician looked so ridiculous in his make-up as a "doctor," who could chase away the spell cast about a sick person by the Evil Spirit, and by some "hocus-pocus," as Roger called it, such as lying on the invalid, breathing into his nostrils, droning a singsong tune like nothing ever heard before by the ears of white men, and many other silly practices.

As they came near the village the boys had noticed that in a wood on a little mound there were numerous strange bundles, done up in dried buffalo hides, and tied with leather thongs, reposing on elevated platforms, which they could not make out at all. Fields told them, however, that this was the burial-place of the tribe; and he even pointed to various earthen vessels that were filled with food of a certain kind, resembling succotash. This, he stated, the Mandans believed was necessary, when members of the tribe had recently died, because they would need some sort of nourishment while on their long journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

"During the night," Fields told them, "of

course the hungry wild animals can creep up, and clean out these bowls. The Indians must know this, but they prefer to delude themselves with the idea that the spirit of the dead person has come in the night, and eaten the offering.''

Being deeply interested, the two boys made a close inspection of the place. In the open center of the burial-place were many skulls formed in a circle, all facing inward.

'' What can they do that for? '' asked Roger, who was hardly able to repress a shudder at the grim sight.

'' I asked Fields, and he told me that, after the platforms break down, the skulls of the dead persons are preserved, and placed here. Although in life, perhaps, the brave has beaten his squaw many times, after he is gone she can be found here every day, talking to this poor old reminder of his presence on earth. Yes, he said she would caress it, even if, when the brave was alive, he had nothing but blows for her.''

'' Well, they are a queer lot,'' Roger confessed, '' and I suppose whites never could understand them. Ugh! let's get away from here, Dick. We ought to find something more

cheerful to look at than this graveyard of mummies." (Note 8.)

"I'm wondering why they have so many yellow dogs around," Dick remarked; "but then, all Indians like baked dog; and Fields says they serve them up on any special occasion when they give a great feast. You know they have no regular time for eating, like white people, but wait till they're real hungry, and then just fill up till they look as if they would burst."

"Why, yes," Roger went on to say, "Pat O'Mara used to tell about Indians who would go hungry for three days, just to get their appetite good and gnawing, and then start in and eat for two hours. I don't think that would suit me."

Tiring at length of peering around among the painted lodges, and seeing the queer sights with which the Indian village seemed to be filled — queer to their eyes, although perfectly natural to the dusky natives who knew no other way of living — the boys finally rejoined the rest of the party.

Captain Lewis was only making a temporary camp as yet, and sticking by his boats. He believed that the Mandans meant to be the best

of friends to his little force; still, many of the frontiersmen had but a poor opinion of all redmen, and bade him not trust any one with Indian blood in his veins. When he came to know the old chief better, and they could feel perfectly safe, then it would be time to locate a permanent camp for the winter. And, yet, they would never cease to keep themselves in constant readiness, so that a surprise and a massacre might not come about.

Of course, having made up their minds to go forth on the following morning, when a messenger was to start for the distant salt-lick, Dick and his cousin could think of little else. Again and again that evening they would turn away from the conversation that was general around one of the fires to talk it over, and agree as to what they should carry with them.

"Captain Lewis said that the warrior would start an hour after daylight; so we must be up early, and get our breakfast," Dick remarked.

"Shall we carry our blankets, and some food, besides our guns?" asked Roger.

"I don't think that necessary, as we expect to spend only one night, or a couple at most, at the lick," Dick replied. "Perhaps it would

be only proper if we carried some pemmican along. And, should the chance come, we might shoot an antelope, or a buffalo, and get plenty of fresh meat. The brave will be only too glad to show us where one can be found, if only to hear the thunder of the 'talking-sticks.'"

"How can we sleep when all this noise is going on?" asked Roger, referring to the shouting of brown-faced pappooses, barking of dogs, and loud voices of the squaws as they jabbered among themselves, not being allowed to join in with the warriors, who were mingling freely with the soldiers and hunters of the expedition.

"Oh! it'll quiet down after a while," Dick replied, laughingly. "They cannot keep it up much longer. And by the time you're ready to turn in, I promise you it'll all be as silent as a church between meeting-days."

And somehow Dick turned out to be a good prophet, for an hour later it seemed as though even the yellow curs that went slinking about the village had been warned that the time for making a racket was passed; for they seldom gave tongue, except to bay the moon occasionally; and then some brave was apt to slip out of a lodge, and hurl a stone at the offender.

"Listen!" said Dick, as he and his cousin

were getting ready to crawl under their blankets, tired, and ready for sleep.

"I hear what you mean, Dick, and it is a sure enough wolf, too. I've listened to too many of them not to know the sound."

"And it is over in the direction of that place where all the platforms are standing, or tumbling down, you know, Roger," pursued the other.

"Yes, showing that the wolves, coyotes, and foxes must find a regular treat out there every night, in the bowls meant for the spirits of the dead braves. How silly it all seems, Dick!"

"To us, yes; but it's all right for these Indians. And, Roger, if some of them went to the towns and cities of the palefaces, don't you think they'd look on lots of things the white people do, and believe them just as foolish? It depends on which way you've been brought up. Father says that what's food for one man is poison to another."

"I guess that's right," Roger replied; and that finished the talk, for with the far-away, mournful howl of that gray wolf still sounding in their ears at intervals, the two lads fell asleep.

They were up before daylight, and got some

breakfast ready, because word had been received from the Mandan chief the night before that the brave, who was to be Captain Lewis's messenger, would be ready to start at exactly an hour after dawn, while the sun was still peeping above the horizon; and they did not wish to delay his departure if they could help it.

Captain Lewis even arose before there was any necessity for his appearance, just to shake the boys by the hand, and wish them the best of good luck.

"Here is the brave who is going to take you to the salt-lick," he remarked, as a Mandan warrior came up, carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows, as well as a small pouch made of fine otter skin, in which he kept his paints and other essentials that went with the office of a messenger brave. "I have given him to understand that he will be held accountable for your safety; and, when you both come back unharmed, he is to receive several handsome presents. His name stands for the Wolf That Howls in the Night; but you can just know him as the Wolf. And now, good-by to you both. We shall be glad when you come back with Williams."

The valiant explorer shook them warmly by the hand; then, as the Indian glided silently away, the boys followed in his wake, filled with fresh hopes that both sincerely trusted might not be doomed to disappointment.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE SALT - LICK

"It seems as though we were foolish not to have brought our horses with us, Dick," Roger said, when noon had come and gone, and they were still pressing on at the side of the Mandan brave, mostly through timber.

"Yes," replied his comrade, "I've been sorry more than once that we made up our minds to let the poor beasts have a rest, while we were gone on this little hunt for Jasper Williams. But as the Wolf expected to travel afoot, I thought it would be all right."

"But you know he's used to tramping it, day after day. He's a strong man, and his muscles are like iron; while we're only boys, you see, Dick."

"Still, we've gone through more than a little in our time, Roger," the other rejoined.

"That's true; and I'm not played out, let me tell you," Roger asserted; "only we might

just as well have had horses, and taken things easy. The Wolf could have run alongside, and we'd have reached the salt-lick quicker than we seem likely to do at this rate."

"I've been trying to get it out of him how much farther we have to go; it's like pounding a hole through a rock; but at last he seemed to understand, and held up three fingers. But just what that means is the question. It might be that we are three miles away from the salt-lick; and then again perhaps it's still three hours' walk."

"Well, we'll have to grin and bear it, as old Pat O'Mara used to say," observed Roger, whose spirits refused to remain cast down for any length of time.

"And we've not had the good luck to get close to any game to fire a single shot," Dick complained.

"But they told us in the village that we'd be almost sure to get a chance at some sort of wild animal at the lick; for they come there right along. I'm hoping that it'll be antelope. I've never forgotten how fine that meat tasted to us; and nothing would please me so much as to have more of the same kind."

Roger licked his lips as he said this, as

though the very mention of that feast made his mouth water.

"One thing, sure," Dick went on, "the summer has gone, and autumn is coming along now. You can feel the tang of it in the early morning air. Why, before long we'll be having frost, if this keeps on."

"Just think how many weeks it has been since we left home," said Roger, as if at times hardly able to believe the fact himself.

"And what a long distance lies between us and those dear ones," added Dick; "but, if things go well, we can soon be starting back down the river again."

"There, look, Dick, the Wolf is making gestures again! He wants to tell you something, I believe. And I hope it is that we're getting close to the lick at last."

"Don't speak so loud, Roger, he seems to be making a motion with his arm as if to point ahead; then he puts his finger on his lips, which must mean that he wants us to keep as still as a mouse. I really believe we must be close by, or else he's discovered signs of Sioux, and wants us to be on our guard."

"No, he's beckoning to us to come on, now, Dick, and he wouldn't do that if he believed

there were enemies around. It must be the lick," Roger went on, lowering his voice to a whisper, at which the Mandan brave smiled, and nodded his head, as though he approved.

They began to exercise more caution as they crept forward. The boys, being hunters themselves, noticed several things that gave them cause to look upon their guide as one who knew his business.

"See how he sneaks along, with never a sound as his feet touch the ground," Roger whispered in the ear of his companion. "Did you ever see anything to beat that? No matter how sharp your hearing might be, you'd never catch the first sound with the Wolf moving along."

"And another thing, Roger, you can see that the breeze is right in our faces. He circled around a little, for I noticed it, and wondered why at the time. Now I know. It was to come in at the lick so as to not alarm any animal that might happen to be there ahead of us."

"Plenty of timber around," remarked the other, signifying with a nod of his head the trees they were passing.

"Yes, lots of it; and now, let's drop all this

talk,'' suggested Dick, after which silence fell upon them.

They tried to imitate the stealthy manner of advance shown by the Wolf, but realized that they would have considerable to learn before they might equal his noiseless method of placing each foot on the ground, with a quick, accurate movement. Roger believed that a panther could never have walked with a more velvety tread than did that agile Mandan warrior, accustomed to this sort of thing from childhood.

It began to grow a little irksome after a while; but they believed that it must soon come to an end, and that thought comforted both lads.

If anything, the caution of the Wolf increased. This would seem to indicate that they must be getting very close to the end of their journey, and both boys began to imagine they could tell just where the lick must lie.

Yes, their guide was heading straight for a thick clump of bushes under the trees, and, from the looks of things, they fancied they were at the end of the tramp.

The Wolf turned his head then to make a gesture, and nod, just as if he wanted them to

understand that they had arrived. Then the three crept forward, a foot at a time. Roger almost held his breath with the suspense, although accustomed to hunting in all its branches. Would they discover any kind of wild animal there, licking the salty rock; or were they fated to be disappointed?

Still, even though there happened to be no game in sight, that was not saying their chance would not come a little later. All they would have to do would be to conceal themselves, and wait, when perhaps a deer, or a buffalo, would appear, bent on gratifying the taste for salt that holds such a strong fascination for most four-footed animals.

Another minute, and they were eagerly peering through the thick bushes. They could see where the lick lay, for it was in the open, and the ground all around had been trampled by many hoofs.

Roger heaved a sigh of disappointment, for there was no sign of antelope, buffalo or any wild animal. On his part Dick felt a keen sense of chagrin, but from another cause; he had secretly hoped to see the form of a white scout lounging in the open, and that would mean that their long search was at an end,

with the much sought Jasper Williams before them. But it was not to be.

The Wolf, if also surprised not to find game there, after all their labor in making such a skillful advance, showed no signs of disappointment. He had doubtless learned early in life that a warrior must never give way to such feelings. When things do not come his way it is his business to keep plodding along until the tide changes, for everything comes to him who waits, even game at a salt-lick.

There was no longer any reason why they should crouch in an uncomfortable attitude. It was just as well to straighten up, relieve their tired muscles, go forward and examine the lick; and then, when the mood seized them, find a new hiding-place, where they could lie in wait.

"Come on, Dick, let's see what the old thing looks like," Roger remarked, as he stepped out from the screen of bushes.

Both the Mandan brave and Dick followed at his heels, for the latter was also curious to investigate. He had never seen a salt-lick, although told about such places by his father, as they were more plentiful away back in Kentucky than along the Mississippi. And it re-

paid them for the trouble they had experienced in making this stealthy advance.

It was easy to see where the salt rock cropped out from the ground. In several places animals had actually worn a hole in it with their rough tongues. Their hoofs had also made various trails in front of each exposed salt rock, and Roger could easily see how a hunter, lying concealed in the bushes within a short arrow-flight of the spot, would be able to bring down his game. No doubt many a tragedy had taken place there, and Roger could picture them in his mind while examining the surroundings.

Dick was still thinking of Jasper Williams.

"I wonder if he could have been here, and gone again," he remarked.

"Oh! I had about lost track of what we were coming out after — you mean the scout, Williams. And, sure enough, he isn't here, is he, Dick? Now, that's another disappointment. We might have found him waiting for some message from the Mandan chief. Well, there's only one thing we can do — camp here, and wait for one or the other to show up — game, or Jasper."

"The Wolf seems to be examining some-

thing on the ground, which, I take it, must be tracks,'' announced Dick.

'' Then perhaps our man *has* been here, and gone again? '' ventured Roger, in a startled tone.

'' No, because he was to leave some sign behind him, a bark message in the crotch of a stick, perhaps, and there's nothing of the kind around, Roger, you see.''

'' Well, but the Wolf seems to be bending over more than ever. Do you think it can be game he scents? Why, there are dozens of tracks here, and I don't see how any particular set could interest him,'' Roger continued.

'' Let's go forward and see for ourselves,'' Dick suggested.

As they came alongside the Mandan brave he pointed to certain marks at his feet. Both lads saw that these were the faint impressions of moccasins. But that in itself gave them no cause for uneasiness, and it was not until the Wolf pointed once more, and uttered a word they took to be '' Sioux,'' that they understood. Some of the deadly enemies of the Mandans had only recently been at the salt-lick; and that might mean they were contemplating an attack on the great Mandan vil-

lage, hardly more than half a day's journey away.

Efforts had plainly been made to erase the footprints, which would indicate that the Sioux had some reason for not wanting their enemies to know of their presence so close by.

Somehow the fact gave both boys an uneasy feeling, and again Dick found himself wishing that he had thought to bring the horses; then, in case of trouble, they would have had a means for beating a successful retreat.

Roger did not look so far ahead as his comrade, as a rule. He was even now wondering what the Wolf saw in these old tracks to cause him alarm. Why, from time to time no doubt lots of Indians, perhaps belonging to various tribes, must visit this spot, since it was the only salt-lick in all the surrounding country, he had been told.

"Now, for my part," he started to say, "I don't see why he should bother with a lot of tracks. Perhaps they are days old. What if the Sioux did try to hide the marks of their moccasins; they'd know the Mandans could tell from the tread that Sioux braves had been here, and, if they were just out on a hunt, it

might be they wouldn't want to have any trouble with their old-time enemies."

"Yes, that might be as you say, Roger; but if you look close you'll see that it *wasn't* days ago these tracks were made. No dew has ever fallen in this footprint, which would go to show it was not here at dawn this morning."

"Oh!" exclaimed Roger, "then, if these marks have been made since sun-up, that's a different story; and perhaps the Wolf does well to look serious. These fierce Sioux are a lot of fighters, they say. The expedition has had ever so much trouble with them while on the way. Now, if we have to leave here before we meet Jasper Williams, it will be too mean for anything."

"That must be as the Wolf says, and perhaps he can make us understand by motions what he thinks about it. There, see him bending down again over yonder, as if he had discovered something else. Those eyes of his are like a hawk's, and little can escape them."

"I wish he would hurry up then, and let us know the worst," grumbled Roger.

Dick was about to say something more, when the words seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, for something remarkable had hap-

pened, something that was so utterly unexpected that he could hardly believe his eyes.

He saw a swift descending object fall directly upon the stooping Mandan brave, and bear him to the ground with the force of the collision. His first impression was that the assailant must be a hungry panther; and then he discovered that it bore more resemblance to a human being, although the two intertwined figures whirled over and over with such incredible swiftness that he could not make sure.

"Oh!" exclaimed Roger, as here and there dark figures began to drop, as though the thick branches of the overhanging trees were raining human fruit; and now it did not require more than one look to tell that these were feathered Indians, undoubtedly Sioux braves, who, seeing their approach toward the salt-lick, had laid this cunning trap to surprise them.

Dick started to throw his gun to his shoulder. It was an involuntary movement, for he could have but little hope of escaping from that circle of enemies; but it was only to have the weapon snatched from his hands, while he was borne to the ground.

CHAPTER XXVIII

RUNNING ELK, THE SIOUX CHIEF

In spite of their struggles the two boys were made prisoners, as was the Mandan warrior. There seemed to be fully a score of the hostile braves; but Dick, as soon as he could look around him, after such rough handling, told his cousin they were not on the warpath, because they had not painted themselves, nor did they wear the feathers in their hair that would indicate a foray, and an expected battle.

It was evidently a hunting party in quest of fresh meat, and they had taken chances of falling in with some of their enemies in thus coming to the salt-lick, hoping to find game there.

They seemed greatly interested in the guns taken from the white boys. Apparently these were an almost unknown thing among the Sioux, who hunted with bows and arrows in those early days, just as their ancestors had done before them.

"What do you suppose they'll do with us?" asked Roger, who looked forlorn. He had a

scratch on his cheek, from which his face had become smeared with blood, although in answer to Dick's anxious question he said that it did not amount to anything.

"Take us to their village, I'm afraid," Dick answered, shortly, for he was trying to figure out some plan that offered at least a shred of hope; but, after many attempts, he was obliged to confess that he could see little relief ahead.

There followed considerable jabbering among the warriors. It seemed as though they were disputing about something, although Dick fancied that this was only their way of conversing.

"Do you think one side wants to put us to the torture right away, and the other is for holding out till they get back to their village?" asked Roger, nervously; for, in spite of his stout heart, the prospect was enough to alarm any one.

"No, I don't believe it's quite as bad as that," replied his cousin, trying to assume a confidence he was far from feeling. "They're just having a palaver about whether to head straight back home, or continue the hunt. That is, I guess as much from the way they point toward the northwest, and then at us."

"But what will happen when we get there, Dick? Can't you think up something to get us out of this scrape?" asked Roger, turning as usual to his stronger cousin, when trouble descended upon them.

"I'm trying the best I know how, Roger, but so far I've thought of nothing that would help us. But we must keep up brave hearts. Even the warlike Sioux have no reason to hate you and me. We have never hurt them in any way, and the most they can have against us is that we're white boys, and have come to their country without asking permission from Running Elk, their great chief."

"But will they put us to the torture, as they do their red enemies whenever they make them prisoner?" Roger asked.

"Perhaps not," answered his companion. "They may take a notion to adopt us into their tribe. Don't you think, Roger, that we'd make pretty good-looking Sioux braves? Both of us have dark hair, and, with some feathers in it, we'd pass for Indians right now. I've only got one little hope outside of that."

"Then please tell me what it is, Dick, because things look so dark ahead of us."

"Stop and remember, Roger, how it was

when we were on that island, with the angry waters creeping up, and threatening to make us swim for it — we said then it was darkest before dawn, and didn't it turn out to be that way? Well, how can we tell but what the same thing may happen to us now, and that out of this capture by the Sioux great good may come? ''

"I only wish I had half your faith, Dick,'' sighed Roger; "but they've made up their minds what to do, and are turning this way, as if meaning to start off on a long tramp. Tell me before they come for us what that one little hope is, that you said you could see. And I pray that it may turn out for the best.''

"It is our guns, Roger,'' the other went on hastily.

"What about them?'' demanded Roger. "We will never be given a chance to snatch them away from the braves who are now carrying them so proudly. And, even if we did, what would two shots mean among twenty foes? ''

"You don't understand me,'' Dick replied. "Our guns are an object of curiosity to every warrior. They will be sure to carry them to the big chief, as his property. Of course not one of them knows a thing about how the

' shooting-sticks ' are used to make the great noise, and cause the game to fall down, while no arrow is seen to shoot through the air. Then he will send for us, perhaps, and make us an offer to spare our lives if we will show him how to fire the guns, and be taken into the tribe. Yes, I think our only hope lies in the secret of shooting the fire and smoke from those guns. But here they come to get us now.''

'' And I'm tired already from our long walk,'' sighed Roger. '' I hope they won't try to keep it up all night, for I'd drop in my tracks. And, Dick, we'd have shown more sense if we'd just stuck to the camp, and waited for Jasper to come in.''

Dick was thinking the same thing himself; but then he was not much of a fellow to cry after the milk was spilt. What was done could not be helped and, instead of bemoaning their hard luck, Dick believed in cudgeling his brains in an effort to find some solution to the problem.

The Sioux had evidently decided to head direct for their distant village. Their unexpected luck in making prisoners of the two white boys had excited them considerably.

They seemed to think that when those at home saw the palefaces they would forgive the lack of fresh meat. Antelope and buffalo could be killed at any time, but it was a rare event to have white prisoners in the strong lodge, and be given a chance to handle those wonderful "shooting-sticks" that, when pointed at an enemy, spat out flame and smoke, and in some mysterious way encompassed the death of the thing aimed at.

Forming around the prisoners, the warrior band started off. Both boys felt as though a heavy weight had been attached to their shoulders, their spirits had so fallen. Just a short half hour before they had been full of eager anticipation concerning the expected meeting with Jasper Williams; but now the heavens had clouded over, and all was gloom.

Still, they took pattern from the jaunty manner of the Wolf. He had been sorely wounded in his fight with the three Sioux who had pounced upon him, after a descending brave had knocked him down and clutched him, but not for worlds would the Wolf show the white feather.

"We can do no less than a red heathen,

Roger," Dick had said, when calling the attention of his cousin to the proud manner of the other prisoner; and somehow this seemed to have a great influence upon both white boys, so that they forced themselves to appear quite at their ease, even while inwardly groaning with physical pain, and mental tortures respecting their uncertain future.

Long did the Sioux walk in that steady manner. Night fell, but they gave not the slightest evidence of feeling distressed, although doubtless they, too, had been on the go since early dawn.

When some hours had passed since the sun went down, Roger complained that his legs were actually giving out under him. Perhaps some of the Indians had noticed that his gait was becoming rather wobbly; for a word was spoken, and to the great relief of the white prisoners they came to a halt.

The Sioux took the precaution to tie their ankles with deerskin thongs; but no fire was kindled, nor were there any signs of a meal in prospect. Perhaps some of those prostrate braves chewed at dry pemmican as they lay there, resting; but, even though they had not a single bite, that would have mattered little,

so great were their powers of endurance when out on the hunt, or the warpath. The same warriors would doubtless loiter around the village for days and weeks, and appear to be the most indolent and lazy of their kind, until an occasion arose for them to once more display their ability to withstand fatigue and hunger.

The weary boys slept, in spite of their discomfort. Nature would not be denied; and while Dick woke up several times during the night, he found himself much refreshed as dawn broke once more.

Again was the march resumed, and all through the day, with only a short stop at about noon, did they keep heading into the northwest.

Roger would have given out but for the earnest pleas of his cousin, and his own natural dislike to appear weak in the eyes of these brawny braves. They had been given some dry food in the morning, before the start was made, and also at noon, and, though neither had much heart for eating, Dick advised that they force themselves to do so, because they would surely need all their strength in order to pull through.

Again and again did Dick continue to paint

a possible rainbow of promise in the blank heavens; but Roger could not see it, no matter how earnestly he looked.

"I'll try to keep going, just to please you, Dick," he would say; "but I'm feeling so terribly that it would almost be a mercy if one of these fellows put an arrow through me right now."

It was toward the end of the afternoon that the Indians with them set up a loud and triumphant series of whoops.

"We must be near the village!" declared Dick, and even forlorn Roger brightened up a little.

"I hope so," he remarked, with a sad smile; "because it'll be a change anyway, no matter what comes. And I tell you, I've just about got to the end of my rope."

"There, I can see something moving over at the brow of that low hill," Dick went on to say.

"And I hear dogs barking, too, which is a sure sign," Roger remarked.

Soon afterwards there remained no longer any doubt that they had arrived at the Sioux village; for over the crown of the hill came a flood of running figures — warriors and boys

and old men, as well as squaws, all eager to see what it was that brought the hunting party back so soon from their foray. And at sight of the two white prisoners they manifested great delight; for it was evidently the first time most of them had ever set eyes on a real paleface, though they may have known some of the half-breeds who had wandered up this way.

Surrounded by a shouting and dancing throng, the two boys and the proud Mandan brave were conducted into the Sioux village. They may have more than once manifested a natural desire to look upon such a settlement; but somehow it did not give them much satisfaction now. As prisoners, with a dark outlook ahead of them, the pioneer boys could hardly be expected to take much interest in the odd sights that met their eyes among the wigwams of the warlike Sioux, concerning whom they had heard so many stories of cruelty and valor.

Some of the brown-faced boys even pinched the prisoners to see whether they could stand pain. Roger was too hot-tempered to put up with this, and proceeded to kick savagely at one of his persecutors, but the other jumped

to one side, and, as the paleface had his hands tied behind him, he stumbled and fell on his back, at which a shout went up from the delighted Sioux boys.

Thus escorted they were taken to a big council lodge, the outside of which was decorated with all manner of colored pictures of battles, the Sioux always being the victors in this historical catalogue. Just as Dick expected, the great chief of the Sioux tribe, Running Elk, was sitting there, cross-legged, on a bearskin rug, waiting to look at the prisoners, and hear the story of the capture from the lips of the participants.

The chief was a powerful-looking man, and wore a head-dress of magnificent feathers that trailed down his back to the ground. His deerskin garments were decorated with colored porcupine quills, and beads, as well as small shells. It must have been his "court dress," as Roger called it, in which he was accustomed to preside at the councils of the tribe.

But the face of Running Elk was stern, and Dick felt his heart grow cold as he looked upon it. Surely they could expect no mercy from such a man. Several times had some of the Sioux attacked the expedition which Captain

Lewis was leading into the northwestern country; and, because of their fierce daring, they had not always issued from these conflicts unscathed. Perhaps wounds had been received, and even the death of a warrior might have resulted from the fire of the explorers' guns. And if this were the case, the Sioux would believe that the Great Spirit had purposely thrown these two paleface boys into their hands in order that they might be tortured, and put to death, so that the departed brave would have slaves with him on his way to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

Standing there, the boys felt the keen eyes of Running Elk upon them. It was as though the chief was figuring in his mind what species of torture should be tried upon the palefaces, in order to appease the grief of the widow of the departed warrior.

"Now he is motioning for them to hand him my gun, Dick," declared Roger, who was doing the best he knew how to appear at his ease, while all the time he could feel his heart thumping against his ribs like a trip-hammer.

Dick watched eagerly to see what the chief would do next. He examined the long rifle all over, but apparently looked upon it as a dan-

gerous thing for any one not familiar with its working to handle.

Finally his eyes again lighted on Dick, and he made motions to his guards, at the same time saying something in his quick, harsh voice.

Apparently the word of the chief was law, for immediately one of the warriors hastened to loosen the withes that were wrapped around the wrists of the boy. Then the chief motioned to Dick, and held out the gun.

"He wants you to show him how it works, Dick!" exclaimed Roger, eagerly, as though a gleam of new hope had come into his soul.

When he had rubbed his hands until the blood circulated once more, Dick accepted the gun from the chief. It gave him a queer feeling to touch it again; but he knew well that his only chance of escape lay in his being able to interest the chief so greatly in the "shooting-stick" that he would spare the lives of the palefaces in order that they might teach his braves how to use the wonderful thing.

So Dick beckoned to them to let him walk outside, which was agreed upon. Surrounded by a mob of moving figures, the boys were allowed to emerge from the council lodge. Dick

was looking for some target at which to shoot. This he quickly discovered in a crow that had alighted on the top of a dead tree some distance away. Quickly leveling the gun, he took aim, and fired.

As Dick was a splendid marksman he had no trouble in bringing down the crow, at which there was tremendous excitement among the assembled Indians. One boy ran and brought back the dead bird, after which every one had to poke a finger into the hole the bullet had made. (Note 9.)

Then Dick, taking his powder-horn, showed them just how he charged the rifle. He put a greased piece of rag about the bullet, as was usual in those days, and rammed it home, after which he primed the pan, making motions that the chief was to try the next shot. But, although Running Elk was known as the bravest man of his tribe, he shook his head, as if to signify that he preferred not having anything to do with such a wonderful invention of the Evil Spirit.

Still, Dick had high hopes that the desire to make use of such a powerful agency against the foes of his tribe might yet influence Running Elk to spare the lives of his white prisoners.

While the assemblage was still engaged in discussing these strange things in an excited manner, the two boys were once more taken in charge by their guards, who led them through the village and thrust them into a log cabin that was undoubtedly the prison, or strong lodge.

It was growing dark, and the boys could hardly see each other's face as they sat there, with their backs against the rough wall of the cabin. At least their hands had not been fastened again, and for that they had reason to be grateful, though it was such a small thing after all, when their lives might be at stake.

Long they sat there, trying to squeeze some hope out of the situation, and listening to the strange sounds that came to their ears from without.

"Hark!" exclaimed Dick, when perhaps an hour had passed since darkness set in, and they had eaten the bowls of food thrust into the strong lodge by one of their dusky guards; "what can that fresh shout mean, do you think?"

"It sounds to me as if they had brought in another prisoner," Roger declared. "But it may only be that they are holding a council to

settle our fate. I remember old Pat O'Mara saying that was what they always did. We might peep out through some of these wide cracks on this side, and see if it is so."

But, just as they were about to do this, the door of the cabin was opened again, and the figure of a man thrown in. He landed in a heap on the hard ground, and gave a grunt.

"That might have broken my neck, if my arms had been tied!" they heard the newcomer say, with what seemed to be a half chuckle; and it was at once apparent to the boys that the last prisoner of the Sioux was also white, like themselves.

Dick coughed, to inform the other that he was not alone.

"Who's there?" asked the unseen man, quickly.

"Two white boys who have been made prisoners by the Sioux," replied Dick. "We belong to Captain Lewis's party, and came out to the salt-lick to see if we could meet a scout who was to report there to a Mandan brave; when the Indians dropped down on us from the branches of the trees. Who may you be, sir, I'd like to know?"

"I? I'm the scout who was to leave word

at the salt-lick; and my name is Jasper Williams!" came the astonishing reply.

What a meeting, after they had come all these hundreds upon hundreds of miles especially to find this man; and now all of them were prisoners in the hands of the savage Sioux!

CHAPTER XXIX

A DESPERATE SITUATION

The surprise of Jasper Williams was overwhelming when he learned that these two lads had braved the dangers of the wilderness, week in and week out, just to find him, so as to get his signature to a document which Dick carried, safely sewed inside the lining of his hunting jacket.

"Of course I'll be only too glad to put my name on it, if only we can get out of this bad scrape," the scout declared, after he had heard the story, and shaken the hands of Dick and Roger Armstrong many times. "I know François Lascelles only too well, and it would give me great pleasure to balk his little game; but just now, my brave lads, it looks as if we'd furnish sport for the heathen at the torture post before many days go by; they're feeling so angry at the whites for coming up here into their country without first making all manner of presents to them."

At that Roger remembered to tell the scout what a slender hope he and his cousin were hugging to their hearts. Jasper Williams considered it well, but did not seem too sanguine.

"Something might come out of it," he observed; "but I know Injun nature too well to think the chief will spare us for that reason alone. If the crowd wants to be amused, we'll be made to run the gauntlet to-morrow at sunrise; and afterwards be burned at the stake, like as not. It's something I always thought would happen to me. A borderer who has run up against Injuns as much as I have must look forward to the time he'll be caught napping, as I was, and pay the penalty with his life. But I'm sorry for you, lads, because you've got mothers and fathers behind, that'll mourn if you never come back again; while there's none to weep for old Jasper Williams."

Roger, who had been busy over at one side of the cabin, now called out:

"They've lighted a big fire there in the open space, and I can see a lot of the braves sitting down, cross-legged, around it. Do you think they're going to hold a palaver, or council, to settle what's to be done with us, Mr. Williams?"

"It looks that way, son," replied the scout, with a touch of pity in his rough voice; "but I can tell better after I have taken a look myself."

Both he and Dick had little trouble in finding crevices through which it was possible to observe all that was going on. The fire around which the Indians had commenced to gather was not so far removed from the strong lodge but the listening prisoners could hear all that took place.

Only the warriors or fighting men were allowed places in the several circles that presently surrounded the leaping flames. The boys and squaws had to stand back, and take no part in the proceedings.

Running Elk was there in plain view, as was also the medicine-man of the tribe, the latter decked out in his awe-inspiring decorations, that gave out a jingling sound every time he moved so much as an arm. As the medicine-man is usually the power behind the throne in every Indian village, he can generally be found at the right hand of the leader or chief, as an adviser. His favor is eagerly sought by braves and squaws, for it is popularly supposed that when angered he can

bring down the wrath of Manitou upon the offender.

All this while there sounded the monotonous beating of tomtoms, or drums made of skins drawn tightly over hollow sections of the trunk of a tree. It was a weird sound, and particularly to those who, crouching behind the logs of the strong lodge, were looking upon the striking picture of these same Indians deciding what their fate should be.

For once Roger found no heart for talking, and it must be something beyond the ordinary that could quench his desire to express his feelings in words. Each of them merely sat there, looking at the strange scene. It was terrible, and at the same time not one of them could tear his eyes away from it, such was the fascination it possessed.

When all of the braves had assembled, the chief made a signal with his hand, at which the sound of the beating tomtoms stopped short. Then a red clay pipe was produced, and, upon being lighted by the medicine-man, was first passed to the chief, who sent out a puff of smoke toward each of the four points of the compass. Then the pipe was passed to the next in line, and so on, until, after a long

time, every one in the first circle, evidently the leading warriors of the tribe, had smoked. (Note 10.)

When the pipe was put away, a brave leaped to his feet, and began an impassioned harangue, making many gestures.

"He is demanding that all of us be put to the torture in the morning," declared Jasper Williams, who had a fair knowledge of many of the Indian tongues. Roger shut his teeth hard together, and repressed the groan that almost escaped him.

Another and yet another warrior followed the first. Some spoke more soberly, and these were the elder ones; perhaps they were counselling that it might be well to keep the whites prisoners, and demand certain favors of the invaders as a recompense for sparing their lives. But the fiery younger element seemed to be vastly in the majority, as Dick realized when a dozen had expressed their views.

What the thoughts of the two boys were would be hard to say. Doubtless their minds turned backward to the happy homes, far away on the bank of the Missouri near its junction with the greater Mississippi; and they could picture those they loved so dearly,

waiting as the weeks went by for some tidings of the brave sons and brothers who had taken upon themselves the dangerous task of finding the one man who could save the homesteads from the scheming French trader.

"It's all over!" exclaimed Roger, with a gulp; and the next moment a din arose that must indeed indicate that the council had been declared ended.

"What did they decide, Mr. Williams?" asked Dick, trying his best to keep his voice from betraying the fact that he was trembling all over with excitement.

The scout groped in the darkness until he could put a hand on the shoulder of each boy. He had bad news to communicate, and in his simple way wished to give them what little encouragement the touch of his hand might possess.

"I'm afraid the decision was against us, lads," he said, solemnly.

"Then we will never live to see the home folks again," spoke Roger, between his set teeth.

Dick was surprised to find how bravely his cousin took it, and this convinced him that much of Roger's nervousness was on the sur-

face, and that, when it came to a pinch, he could show just as strong a front as the next one.

"But the council has not been dismissed yet, for the braves are still sitting there as we saw them," Dick observed at this juncture.

"Unless I am much mistaken," Jasper Williams went on, "they are sending guards to fetch us out. It was not fitting that we should be present when they were deciding our fate; but, now that a judgment has been rendered, we may be led forth to hear sentence pronounced by the great chief. My lads, you know what the red heathen think of any one who shows the white feather. Be brave now, I beg of you, for the honor of the white race. Show them that paleface boys can stand pain just as well as Injuns are taught to do."

Just then the door of the strong lodge opened, and warriors, coming in, seized hold of the three prisoners; for the Wolf had evidently been confined in some other prison, perhaps bound hand and foot, since his fate did not have to be debated. He was doomed from the first, being a hated Mandan.

So they were led forth. Roger, determined to prove that he was a son of his father, shut

his teeth hard together, and made up his mind that nothing these savage Sioux could do would make him cry out. Dick managed to lock his arm in that of his cousin, knowing that even such contact would give the other heart.

Escape was impossible. All they could do was to meet their fate bravely. And if Roger remembered what his cousin had said about it being the darkest just before dawn, he must have smiled bitterly as he contemplated the utter impossibility of anything happening to save them.

And yet, the bread which they had cast upon the waters so long ago was due to return to them, here, now, in this most important crisis of their lives.

They were hustled through the crowd of squaws and boys that had gathered outside the triple circle of warriors. Numbers struck at them; others pinched them maliciously, and threw dirt in their faces.

Then suddenly it seemed to Dick that a miracle had been wrought. A squaw darted forward, threw one of the guards aside, and, seizing hold of Roger, looked eagerly in his face, after which she appeared greatly excited.

And Dick felt his heart give a great bound, as hope once more took possession there; for he had recognized the face of this old squaw. It was Karmeet, whom last he remembered seeing seated at their camp fire, and, with the Indian girl, Dove Eyes, partaking of their humble supper, to afterwards disappear so mysteriously in the night!

CHAPTER XXX

THE DAWN BREAKS — CONCLUSION

The most tremendous excitement followed; for the old squaw, still clinging to Roger, was appealing to the chief. Running Elk was listening, too, and seemed greatly interested in what she was saying.

In fact, the entire assemblage was spell-bound; warriors and squaws bent their heads forward, to better catch all that she said, and whenever Karmeet paused to catch her breath there could be heard loud sighs.

Dick was thrilled by the sudden change in their condition. Although he could not tell the meaning of a single word the old squaw spoke, it was very evident from her gesticulations that she was telling the story of how these white boys had saved the lives of herself and the Indian girl when the savage panther was ready to spring down upon them; and afterwards entertained them beside their camp fire,

feeding them, and even covering them with a blanket to keep the night dews off.

Yes, as the story progressed, and she became even more excited, he could tell how she was demanding their lives as a just recompense for their gallantry toward herself and her girl companion; for she finally covered both of them with her hands, and then appealed to Running Elk.

The great chief of the warlike Sioux seemed to be considering; but Dick, knowing as much of Indian character as he did, felt that the case was already decided. The honor of an Indian would never allow their being injured after they had shown themselves friends of the Sioux.

"Give yourselves no further uneasiness, lads," said Jasper Williams, heartily, at that critical moment. "You have been lucky enough to do a great service to the sister and the child of Running Elk himself, for they bear that relationship to the chief. He is bound to free you after that. And every Injun in the village will want to shake hands with you. I would that my chances were half as bright."

"We will refuse to go without you,

Jasper,'' declared Dick, firmly; for he had already taken a great liking to the scout; and besides, was not Williams a most important factor in the fulfillment of the mission on which he and Roger had started forth from the settlement away down the Missouri?

"Listen to what the great chief is about to say,'' remarked the scout, forgetting that he was the only one of the trio able to interpret the Sioux tongue.

But, since all Indians make considerable use of gestures in their oratory, it was not so very difficult, after all, to comprehend the tenor of what Running Elk said.

First he asked his sister several quick questions, to all of which she replied eagerly, pointing first to Roger, and then his cousin; after which she led Dove Eyes forward, and the little girl, too, recognized the lads. After he had quite satisfied himself that there could be no mistake, the Sioux chief addressed himself to the assembled warriors. He grew quite impassioned in his talk; and often, when he came to a pause, a chorus of grunts answered him. But Dick noticed that all the nods of those grim heads were *up and down;* and, wise boy that he was, this told him that the braves were

in complete accord with what Running Elk was saying.

Finally the chief arose deliberately to his feet, though none of the others who were sitting made a move. He walked over to where the three whites stood, and held out his hand to Roger first of all; for had not his sister declared that it was he whose "shooting-stick" had killed the panther, and whose blanket had been used to cover their forms from the night air?

"Brother!"

The word fell from the lips of the chief, and rather staggered both lads, for they had not dreamed that he knew a bit of English. But his meaning was plainly indicated. After that they were not to be looked upon in the light of enemies, but honored friends. An Indian always pays back a debt, whether of evil or good.

Then the chief turned to Dick, and performed the same service. The latter was shrewd enough to know that, if anything was to be done for Jasper Williams, now was the accepted time. He had heard his father often say "If you want to accomplish anything you must strike while the iron is hot."

So he immediately threw one arm about the shoulders of the scout, and, looking the great chief squarely in the face, indicated Williams as he spoke the words:

"Him brother too!"

Running Elk knew what was meant. He hesitated, because there had been no mention made of the scout taking part in the rescue of those who belonged to his immediate family. But from the warriors arose a chorus of sounds, as though they had been swept off their feet by the thrilling story of the squaw; and were willing to do the thing handsomely. So presently, in a less enthusiastic way, Running Elk held out his hand to Jasper, who immediately seized upon it, knowing as he did that his life was to be spared.

After that it was easy to communicate, for Williams could act as interpreter. He answered all the questions of the chief, and even tried to explain just why the expedition, led by Captain Lewis, was in the country, telling Running Elk that they had no designs on the land of the Sioux, but were simply passing through, and that it would likely be a great many years before he would see another paleface in all that section.

No doubt what the scout told Running Elk would prove of great value, later, to the exploring party, since it opened the eyes of the Sioux chief to certain facts he had not known before. It was likely to keep the Sioux from going on the warpath against the little band of daring whites — at least this particular branch of them — and that would be worth something in the long winter months, while the men of the party had to do more or less hunting in order to supply the camp with fresh food.

There was one thing more Dick thought to do. The Wolf was one of his company, and he could not bear the thought of abandoning him to his fate. So he urged upon Jasper to try to have him included in the party when they went forth from the village of the Sioux on the morrow.

Perhaps, after all, one poor Mandan brave did not amount to much, in the estimation of Running Elk, who thought he should do the thing up completely while about it; for lo, and behold, Wolf was brought forth at the time of their departure, though the populace that watched their going had only frowns for the Indian.

Roger's last act, after again shaking the hand of the chief, was to pass over to where the old squaw was standing, a smile on her broad brown face, and take her hand in his, as though he would try to express his gratitude; after which he bent down and kissed the little Indian girl who had learned her first words of English from him, while seated at their lonely camp fire that night in the timber.

He would often remember Dove Eyes, and her eagerness to learn to speak the language of the palefaces.

Thus it was that the four went out of the Sioux village unharmed, even honored with loud yells that might be taken for the Indian way of cheering. Jasper Williams declared that it was the nearest approach to a miracle he ever expected to see in all his days; and that the kind deed which the two lads had done on that other occasion had been returned to them many fold.

And so the bread cast upon the waters had come back to them after many days. No matter how long they might live, Dick and Roger would always believe that it paid to stand up for the weak, and even risk their lives in defense of the helpless. Only for that little hap-

pening what might not have been their fate on this morning that saw them started back toward the Mandan town?

Of course they reached the camp in good time, and great was the astonishment of the explorers when they heard that the boys and Williams had been prisoners in the village of the great Sioux chief, Running Elk, who until then had evinced the most bitter hostility toward the whites, laboring under the belief, which was fostered by the half-breed traders, that they had come to steal away the lands of the redmen.

Jasper Williams gladly signed the paper Dick had with him, in the presence of both Captain Lewis and Captain Clark, who were only too pleased to add their honored names as witnesses.

"I must say," remarked the soldier leader of the expedition, as he shook the hand of each of the boys cordially, after this operation had been duly carried out, and the precious paper carefully placed away in a pocket of Dick's hunting tunic, "that I never did anything with greater satisfaction in all my life, because you boys have certainly shown yourselves to be a credit to your brave grand-

father, in taking your lives in your hands, and venturing all the way up into this unknown wilderness, upon the noble mission of saving the homes of your people."

"Yes," added his associate, just as warmly, as he too insisted upon squeezing the hands of the cousins, "and if, after mature deliberation, you decide to remain over with the expedition until spring, and go with us to the wonderful Western sea, across the mighty mountains of which we have all heard so much, depend on it you will find a warm welcome here. For we have already come to regard you with affection, and nothing would please us more."

Dick looked at Roger, and the latter smiled happily, for to tell the truth the heart of the more impulsive lad was very strongly set upon remaining with these intrepid men. Deep down in his soul was planted the love for looking on new and wonderful sights; and for years Roger had watched the glowing sun sink to rest night after night with a secret hope that some day he might be given the opportunity to follow its track, and gaze upon sights that the eyes of white men had never before beheld.

And now that chance lay at his door, if only Dick would decide to stay.

Meanwhile Jasper Williams was explaining just how it came that his signature was so necessary on the paper which meant so much to the Armstrongs.

It seemed that his mother had been connected with a French family, and that, in taking title to the property which he settled on near the St. Louis trading post, David Armstrong had neglected to properly secure the signature of Jasper's parents, as would have been wise.

As they were both gone long since, the only one who could attach his signature to the document was Jasper himself; otherwise the property could be taken possession of, after due process of law, by any one who might have brought it in. This the scheming Lascelles must have learned, and the first thing old David knew of the matter was a notification that, unless he wished to be evicted in the spring, he would have to purchase the several farms over again, paying what was considered an enormous price in those pioneer days.

Of course, now that the precious signature of Jasper Williams, son of Helene Villefue,

was properly affixed to the paper, David Armstrong could afford to snap his fingers at the crafty French trader, and defy him. When the scout made this affirmation it gave the two boys the greatest satisfaction possible.

"We have nothing to regret in deciding to make this trip, have we, Dick?" exclaimed the impulsive Roger.

"I should say not," replied his cousin; "and if we had to do the whole thing over again, even knowing how close to death we should be brought, I am sure neither of us would hesitate for a second. And to think that now our homes will never be taken away from our mothers. That was the cruel part of it; and for one I can never forgive that French trader, François Lascelles, for trying to do such a rascally thing."

"And as he is somewhere up in this country, as we have reason to believe," added Roger, "looking for Jasper Williams with the intention of trying to keep him from signing his name to this paper, why, we may run across him sooner or later — that is, of course, if we decide to remain over with the expedition, which I truly hope may be the case."

"We will take a couple of days to talk it

over,'' was all Dick would say; but in his eyes shone a light that gave Roger great hope.

And in the end that was the way it turned out, much to the delight of the younger lad, who would have been grievously disappointed had it been decided best for himself and cousin to return home that fall.

The two captains had interested themselves greatly in the welfare of the boys, whom they had come to admire very much. They fancied that having these lads in camp, with their cheery ways and sunny faces, would be a pleasure for all concerned during the long winter days and nights. And accordingly they used what influence they could command to get Dick to look at the thing reasonably.

The result was as might have been expected. A picked party had been made up to start down the river to St. Louis in a boat secured from the Mandans, with a message for the President, and the boys were influenced to entrust their precious document to the charge of one of the men, who was commanded by Captain Lewis to surely deliver it, together with letters from the boys, directly into the hands of Grandfather Armstrong, before starting for Washington.

For Dick and Roger had succumbed to the great temptation to accept the generous offer of the leader of the explorers, and remain over the winter with them, going on in the spring to the distant Pacific, and seeing those wonderful Rocky Mountains of which they had heard such amazing stories.

This they eventually did; and it may be well understood that such a continuation of their journey opened up a new field of adventures for our heroes, some of which will be found related in the pages of the next volume of this series, to be called, "The Pioneer Boys of the Yellowstone."

And while they had seen no more of the half-breed, Batiste Dupuy, or had the ill luck to run across the French trader, François Lascelles, while ascending the Missouri, it might be that those same individuals would once more come forward later on, to annoy Dick and Roger under the false impression that they had not yet secured the signature of Jasper Williams to the document.

Free from the care that had so long been oppressing them, the boys could now look forward to a long period of enjoyment as the fall drew on, and they became better acquainted

with their Mandan friends, and accompanied the warriors on many of their hunts. And while they are thus enjoying themselves to the full, we will take our leave of them.

THE END.

NOTES

Note 1 (page 34)

Most of the vast country west of the Mississippi River was owned in 1803 by France, Spain having made a secret treaty with France by which she ceded the territory of Louisiana, embracing the present States of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Indian Territory, and part of Colorado. President Jefferson, learning of this treaty, sent to France a commission empowered to purchase the island on which New Orleans stood; and also the right of a passage to the sea. Napoleon Bonaparte responded with an offer to sell all of Louisiana to the United States for twenty million dollars. After bargaining for awhile the vast territory was purchased for fifteen million dollars. Bonaparte was delighted. "This accession of territory," said he, rubbing his hands, "strengthens forever the power of the United States. I have given England a rival upon the sea, which will sooner or later humble her pride."

Note 2 (page 36)

Very few people realized the value of the newly bought possessions, and many roundly abused President Jefferson for making the purchase. But the Western settlers were overjoyed. "At last," they said, "we have room for expansion. Hurrah for Jef-

ferson!" Highly delighted at his success, the President recommended to Congress, in a confidential message, that a party should be dispatched to trace the Missouri River to its source, cross the Rocky Mountains, and go to the Pacific Coast. The plan was approved, Captain Meriwether Lewis, the President's private secretary, being appointed to lead the expedition, which was originally intended to consist of nine young Kentuckians, fourteen United States soldiers, two French voyageurs to serve as hunters and interpreters, and a black servant for Captain William Clark, who was a joint commander. On the 24th of May, 1804, the little band of adventurous souls, augmented by additional frontiersmen, left the mouth of the Missouri, and struck out toward the unknown West, with three boats, one a covered one, to carry their possessions.

Note 3 (page 132)

During its long course from the far away Rockies to its junction with the mighty Mississippi, the Missouri River penetrates every variety of country one can think of. In many places it passes through vast stretches of prairie land, where, as far as the eye can reach, the country is like a billowy sea, being covered with grass. Then again it cuts a channel between rocks that form rapids quite as dangerous as those of the Upper Nile, and known as the Cataracts. There are banks that are heavily timbered; and even low places, swampy, and almost impossible of navigation for canoes. Much difficulty is encountered in avoiding the islands that crop up, some covered only with rank water grass, others bearing a luxuriant growth of trees, such as sycamore, cottonwood, walnut, and

others. Sand-bars form and disappear daily, so that a pilot never knows what he has before him in trying to take a boat along this erratic stream. And it was up this swift current that the daring explorers, led by Lewis and Clark, ventured to push their three boats, day after day, as the summer months glided on, facing perils of every description, and bent on carrying out the plans which the President himself had personally approved, if indeed the entire scheme was not of his own conception.

Note 4 (page 160)

Well might Roger say this, for at that day, and much later also, it was no uncommon thing for a ranger on the prairie to see, from some butte, a drove of bison rolling by that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon, and take hours in passing. The Indians said they were as many as the grains of sand on some of the bars that could be found along the erratic course of the great Missouri River. They hunted them in and out of season, and killed tens of thousands, no doubt, every year, often driving an entire herd over some precipice for the sake of securing the tongues alone, which were esteemed a great delicacy. But up to the introduction of the repeating firearm, at about the time the Central Pacific Railroad was being put through, there seemed no perceptible diminution to the vast number of the shaggy beasts. But civilization came and finished the business; and at the present time, save for a few scattered specimens, in small droves, numbering some hundreds in all, the once famous bison, called wrongly the buffalo, has been entirely exterminated.

Note 5 (page 274)

The Mandan tribe of Indians has always been more or less of a mystery to those historians who have tried to figure where the people inhabiting the country at the time of the discovery of America, and its later development, originally came from. They were of a much lighter hue than any of the other Indians, and, while some students have declared their positive belief that they must have sprung from the lost tribe of Israel, others claim to see certain similarities in customs and even language between the Mandans and the Welsh. These latter claim that at some time in the remote past a vessel with a Welsh crew must have been blown across the Atlantic ocean, and into the Gulf of Mexico, by a severe storm; and that the survivors made their way up the Mississippi, finally marrying into a tribe of Indians; and that their descendants still clung to some of the old-country ways. It is very curious how many very plausible reasons can be found for believing such a thing as this. It may be true; but the point has never been wholly proved; and so the origin of the "White Indians" still remains shrouded in mystery to this day. The Mandans suffered fearfully from the smallpox epidemic after they began to have intimate relations with the whites; and, in fact, the once great and powerful tribe has been almost exterminated.

Note 6 (page 288)

Salt-licks, or saline springs, used to be very common in the early days of the pioneers, and many of the histories of those times make mention of them. Even

in the African wilderness certain animals will come many miles just to get a chance to lick up the salt at a certain place. The same is true of numerous places in our Wild West of to-day. Deer, in particular, are fond of coming to a "lick." The craving for a taste of salt seems to induce them to cover vast distances. Hunters, knowing this love for salt on the part of game, often hide in ambush near such a magnet, and shoot down wild animals with the greatest of ease. Indeed, in some States the practice of lying in wait at such a place is looked upon as unsportsmanlike, and frowned down upon, even to the extent of making laws for the protection of salt-hungry game.

Note 7 (page 290)

As the two boys, Dick and Roger, discovered for themselves, when fortune allowed them to spend some time in a Mandan village, these Indians had many ways in common with other tribes, even while in certain traits they differed greatly from the Blackfeet, the Sioux, the Shoshones, and the Pawnees. One of these consisted of the customary medicine-man, who was supposed to be in direct communication with Manitou, or the Great Spirit. When a storm came along, and the thunder roared, this old humbug would pretend to be talking with the Great Father above; and, of course, would interpret as he pleased what the Spirit was supposed to say in reply to his questions. He always dressed in a hideous costume, and looked as much like the Evil One as any person could imagine, with his paint, his buffalo tails, his fanciful adornments, and often the horns which he assumed for occasions. His principal office as the "doctor," or medicine-man,

is to frighten away the devils that are supposed to be afflicting sick people. He would go through with a tremendous amount of nonsense, and, if the sick person got well, he had the credit of working a miracle; whereas, if he or she died, it was the will of the Great Spirit! Nor is the medicine-man confined to the Indian tribes of North America; for the same species of charlatan has been discovered in the heart of blackest Africa, among the negro nations inhabiting that region.

NOTE 8 (PAGE 293)

The Mandans had many strange habits, some of which must have come down to them from remote ancestors; while others were doubtless the result of their living in the country where wolves and coyotes abounded, and had to be guarded against, even in the disposal of the bodies of their dead. When a warrior died his body was wrapped in several buffalo skins, and the last one was tightly secured with thongs. Then the funeral cortege took up its line of march for the Indian cemetery, where, with fitting ceremonies, the body was secured to a platform erected on four posts, and usually some five or six feet from the ground. Here the widow would repair day after day, communing with the spirit of the departed one, and leaving a bowl of hot succotash, a mixture of corn and beans. This was intended as food to sustain the brave on his long journey to the Land of Shades. The steam arising and disappearing was believed to be inhaled by the unseen spirit; and, of course, when the bowl was found empty in the morning, having been cleaned out by wandering animals, the Indians chose to think that

the dead warrior had in some way devoured its contents during the still hours of the night.

Note 9 (page 324)

It was not for many years after the exploring expedition of Lewis and Clark passed through the country of the fierce and warlike Sioux tribe, that these Indians learned how to handle firearms. At that day they depended almost solely upon their bows and arrows, spears, tomahawks and knives, to bring down game, and fight their battles with other tribes with whom they might chance to be at war. They gave the early settlers great trouble, and many an uprising was followed by massacres. As late as the seventies they were a power to be reckoned with by the United States Government; and the memory of the massacre of General Custer's gallant command will always be one of the saddest records of border warfare. At that time it is said that there were several thousand Sioux warriors under Sitting Bull, which fact is sufficient to explain why the Sioux have always been held in such fear along the frontier of the Great Northwest.

Note 10 (page 332)

This ceremony of smoking the pipe at their councils has always been a leading characteristic of Indian nature. When a stranger visits a tribe, and is to be treated as a friend, he is invited to smoke the peace pipe; and this really consists in puffing smoke in the direction of the north, east, south, and west. There is some sort of meaning to it, of course, and it is understood to stand for the promise on the part of the

participants that they will remain friends for all time, whether the wind blows from one quarter of the compass or the other. It signifies complete concord between them. Besides, this is a very sacred institution; and like the breaking of bread among other peoples, or the passing of salt with the Bedouins, or Arabs of the desert, goes to signify that the bonds between those assembled must not be severed lightly. In the case of the council convened to settle the fate of the white prisoners, possibly some other meaning might have been attached to this puffing of the smoke toward the four quarters.

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